



















MUSES AND LEXICONS

Nicolas Slonimsky

Interviewed by Thomas F. Bertonneau

Completed under the auspices  
of the  
Oral History Program  
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Los Angeles

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction. . . . .	.viii
Interview History. . . . .	xv
TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE (March 12, 1977). . . . .	.1
Unusual circumstances of birth: date and place--The Slonimsky family--Intelligentsia in St. Petersburg--Genius and childhood-- Discovering the gift of perfect pitch--First piano lessons--Studies at St. Petersburg Conservatory of Music.	
TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO (March 12, 1977). . . . .	.21
Ambitions and influences--Genius and accomplish- ment--Fellow students--German influence on instruction--The February 1917 Revolution-- Flight to the Ukraine--Kiev: the Scriabin family--Constantinople.	
TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE (March 15, 1977). . . . .	.42
To Paris, 1921--Via Bulgaria: musician of all trades--Meeting Serge Koussevitzky-- Engaged as Koussevitzky's rehearsal pianist-- Playing <u>Le Sacre du Printemps</u> --Koussevitzky's difficulties with the rhythms--Invitation to the United States--Establishing an opera company at the Eastman Institute, Rochester-- English self-taught--The Eastman circle--Paul Horgan.	
TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO (March 15, 1977). . . . .	.62
Thoughts on Koussevitzky--Secretary to Koussevitzky--Break with Koussevitzky-- Early compositions-- <u>Five Advertising Songs</u> -- Contribution to Henry Cowell's <u>New Music</u> <u>Quarterly</u> --Leaving Boston.	
TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE (March 17, 1977). . . . .	.83
Chamber Orchestra of Boston--Desire to conduct-- Meeting Henry Cowell--Conducting debut, 1927--	





Reviews--Contact with the orchestra--Showing off--Later concerts--Cowell arranges meeting with Charles Ives--First performance of Ives--Publication of Three Places in New England--Problems of conducting Ives.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO (March 17, 1977). . . . .102

Note to conductors on Three Places in New England--Ives on conductors--Conductors and Ives's music--Slonimsky: "martyr to a cause"--Legend of the first concert, 1931--Apocrypha--More on Ives--Taking Three Places in New England to Europe--Performances in Paris--Reviews.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE (March 17, 1977). . . . . 122

Concert in Berlin--Laudatory reviews--Fights in the audience--Concert in Budapest--1932: history cancels the tour--Playing Ives at the Hollywood Bowl, 1932--Engaged to conduct at the Bowl--Conducting Schoenberg--Recording in New York: Ives, Ruggles, Varèse--Rejection for the conductorship of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO (March 19, 1977). . . . . 143

Compositions: Silhouettes Iberiennes--"The Haunting Horn"--Songs--Minitudes--Theories of music--Experiments--Combinations of scales--Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns--Surprising sales.

TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE (March 19, 1977). . . . .163

Music Since 1900--Choosing a title--Collecting material--Correspondences--Writing to Schoenberg--Origin of the term jazz--Reviews--Lexicon of Musical Invective--Some examples--Trip to South America, 1941.

TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE TWO (March 19, 1977). . . . .183

South American trip--Villa-Lobos--Carnival in Rio: My Toy Balloon--Series of recordings of Latin American music--Music of Latin America.



[Second Part] (March 23, 1977). . . . .	190
Visit to the Soviet Union, 1935--Dmitri Shostakovitch--Meeting young composers-- Blows against modernism--Contact with brothers--FBI reaction in the fifties.	
TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE (March 23, 1977). . . . .	202
"Are you now. . . ?"--The FBI quizzes Slonimsky--Cancellation of a lecture in Pennsylvania--Attacks on liberals--Further smears of Slonimsky--Denunciation of Soviet attitude toward music: "shot on both sides" --Thaw of cold war--Encounters between American and Russian composers--Trip to Russia, 1962, under State Department sponsor- ship--Meeting nephew, composer Sergei Slonimsky.	
TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE TWO (March 23, 1977). . . . .	222
Discovering a new Russian language--Lectures-- Playing modern music--Strong Russian interest in culture--Dichotomy: injustice and an intellectual renaissance--Antoni Slonimsky, Polish poet--Travels in Poland--Yugoslavia-- Rumania--Bulgaria.	
TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE ONE (March 25, 1977). . . . .	242
First editorial assignment: <u>International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians</u> , 1939-- Difficulties--Detective work--Legend: snow at Mozart's funeral--Demythologizing Beethoven's Third Symphony--Researching the origin of the word <u>jazz</u> --Rock and roll-- Oscar Thompson.	
TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE TWO (March 25, 1977). . . . .	262
<u>Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians</u> -- Origins in the late nineteenth century--Need to rewrite entries from original edition-- Publication, 1958--Errors--Zyžík, the unknown composer--Verifying every name--Walter Dahms (or Gualtério Armando)--Bringing about a curious reunion.	



TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE ONE (April 7, 1977). . . . .282

"The Big Surprise" TV quiz show--Auditioning--  
Category: misinformation--The questions--  
In the limelight--Quitting at \$30,000--Rewards  
of fame--Songs from the 1940s: Gravestones of  
Hancock, New Hampshire--Möbius Strip Tease.

TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE TWO (April 7, 1977). . . . .303

Minitudes--Interest in science--Birth date  
tricks--Magic of mathematical calculations--  
Feats of memory--Next project: Lectionary  
of Musical Information, Instruction, and  
Entertainment--Some examples--An impossible  
question.

TAPE NUMBER: IX [video session] (April 9, 1977). . . .321

Good and bad music--Collecting bad music--  
Influences of Erik Satie--Conducting Ives:  
a demonstration--Möbius Strip Tease--  
Teaching career--Thesaurus of Scales and  
Melodic Patterns--Bach's skull--On the  
piano: derangements of Bach--Of Beethoven--  
Schoenberg harmonized--Cabbage waltz--  
Piano trickery--"Sex and the Music Librarian"--  
A musical finale.

Index. . . . . 347

Index of Nicolas Slonimsky Works. . . . .362

[Photograph of Nicolas Slonimsky and Möbius strip  
by Thomas R. Young]





## INTRODUCTION

If St. Petersburg, Russia, under the last of the czars, Nicholas II, was not the strangest of earthly cities, it must then have been a candidate strong in the running for such a title. Into this "city of nightmares" (as the man himself characterizes the metropolis of his birth), Nicolas Slonimsky was born on April 15, 1894, according to the Russian calendar (April 27 of the Western calendar). Tchaikovsky had died during the previous year; Rachmaninoff and Scriabin were still students, and the leading, living figure of Russian music was Rimsky-Korsakov, esteemed professor and later director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory.

Slonimsky's parents were cosmopolitan Jews and members of the intelligentsia. Slonimsky père was an economist, who published the first book in the Russian language on Karl Marx. The mother of Nicolas was an educated woman who had attended university classes in medicine at a time when higher learning in Russia was much the exclusive preserve of men; she also took a course in chemistry with Borodin, the composer who was known primarily as a chemist. An aunt, Isabelle Vengerova, an accomplished pianist (and later a teacher of Leonard Bernstein and Samuel Barber, among other luminaries), gave young Nicolas his first lessons at



the keyboard and thus determined her precocious nephew's musical future.

She discovered early in the game that Nicolas possessed perfect pitch--which to this day is believed to be a pre-requisite to successful musicianship--and when she became professor at St. Petersburg Conservatory, Nicolas entered her piano class. Before being admitted, he auditioned before no less a master than Alexander Glazunov himself. So precisely did Nicolas proceed through the test-pieces and scales that he was given a 5-plus, the highest possible grade in the Russian schools. When Glazunov played a particularly complicated chord, Nicolas was able, by ear, to name each of its component notes.

His overriding ambition was to become a concert pianist, and so confident was he in his powers to attain such a feat that he neglected his practice. The inevitable result of this was that a career as a virtuoso was a dream that never came true. Unable to obtain concert engagements, Nicolas earned his living by playing in silent movies and by giving lessons; among his pupils was a niece of the czar.

When the First World War broke out, Slonimsky was called up, but not sent to the front; instead, he served in a regimental band quartered in St. Petersburg. As the war continued, life in the imperial capital of Russia became ever more and more intolerable. The revolution made it more





dangerous. Slonimsky left St. Petersburg, by then renamed Petrograd, and proceeded south.

The years 1918 to 1923 were a period of continuous dislocation for Slonimsky, as for thousands of other refugees who, for one reason or another, could not or would not cope with Russia in turmoil. He spent a year in Kiev, a few months in Yalta on the Crimean peninsula; then came an evacuation to Istanbul, an early gathering place for expatriated Russians. Here, the routine of playing with pick-up orchestras in restaurants, silent movies, and hotels continued. After about a year in Turkey, Slonimsky traveled to Bulgaria, and then to Paris. It was in the French capital that Slonimsky met Serge Koussevitzky, the great Russian conductor.

Koussevitzky engaged Slonimsky as a repetiteur. This employment was extremely useful to Slonimsky, who learned for the first time the works of Stravinsky and other masters of modern music. Slonimsky, in fact, prepared a performing edition of Le Sacre du Printemps which Koussevitzky used for many years afterwards.

Slonimsky arrived in America in 1923 as opera coach at the newly established Eastman School of Music at Rochester, New York. He spoke no English, but with the help of his close friend, the novelist Paul Horgan, he quickly learned the language.



In 1925, the association with Koussevitzky was resumed, and Slonimsky followed him to Boston. Unfortunately their relationship soured, and they parted, no longer friends. Profiting from his experience with Koussevitzky, Slonimsky himself embarked on a conducting career. In 1927, he organized the Chamber Orchestra of Boston, for the express purpose of inaugurating the works of the avant-garde of American composers.

The Chamber Orchestra of Boston had grown out of Slonimsky's friendship with Henry Cowell and Charles Ives. Both Cowell and Ives had found it difficult to get their music played in public. At the time, the best-known American composers were men of the previous century. Contemporary American music was represented by Walter Piston and Aaron Copland, whose works began to be known. The tone-clusters of Cowell and Ives's polytonality and polyrhythmicality had proved much too bizarre for the few conductors who would even consent to play the music through in rehearsal.

Slonimsky's orchestra was able to give a series of concerts which introduced works by extreme modernists, including Ives himself, to the musical public. There were premieres in Boston and New York of Ives's Three Places in New England, of Cowell's Suite for piano and orchestra (with Cowell himself as a soloist playing inside the piano as well



as at the keyboard), and works of the formidable Edgar Varèse. In 1931, Slonimsky played new American music in Paris, and in 1932, he conducted American programs in Berlin. His reception in Paris was most flattering, but in Berlin, the incipient Nazi elements attacked Slonimsky and his music (including Varèse's Arcana, which Slonimsky conducted with the Berlin Philharmonic) as decadent examples of tainted, non-Aryan art. However, Otto Klemperer attended one of the Berlin performances, and was impressed not only by the music itself, but by Slonimsky's musicianship.

Upon his return to the United States, Slonimsky continued his part in the crusade for modern music, rapidly assuming the role of a martyr for the cause of Ives, Cowell, and company. A particularly bad reaction ensued when Slonimsky programmed Ives and Schoenberg in a concert at the Hollywood Bowl in 1934; it was too radical for the "subcultural audience." Slonimsky's conducting career, determined and uncompromising as it was, came to a jarring halt.

There was a certain tragedy in this. Even the most cursory glance at the programs which Slonimsky conducted in those seven years between 1927 and 1934 reveals that Slonimsky was quite probably the most farsighted orchestral conductor of his time. Works which he was the first to perform became the classics of the second half of the



century. While there had been possibilities for Slonimsky to be engaged as music director of a major symphony orchestra in the early 1930s, after the debacle of the Hollywood Bowl, Slonimsky was considered too radical to be acceptable.

Undaunted, Slonimsky turned his talents to musicology and lexicography, and he produced a number of books which are standard in the field. These include Music Since 1900 and the Lexicon of Musical Invective: A Collection of Critical Assaults on Composers Since Beethoven's Time. It is prefaced by an essay of great psychological insight, "On the Non-Acceptance of the Unfamiliar."

In the late thirties, Slonimsky traveled to South America. In 1942, he published Music in Latin America, the summary of his explorations, and recorded an album of South American chamber music for the Columbia Studios.

In the early 1960s, Slonimsky went behind the Iron Curtain to plead the cause of modern American music in Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Rumania, and the Soviet Union. These efforts were greatly appreciated; Slonimsky is today a persona grata in the USSR. When the Union of Soviet Composers and Musicians published the Shostakovich Memorial Album in 1976, Slonimsky was the only American musician invited to contribute a composition based on the monogram of Shostakovich--D, S, C, H (D, E flat, C, B)--in appreciation of Slonimsky's efforts to keep the lines of communication





between American and Soviet musicians open.

Slonimsky edited the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh editions of Oscar Thompson's International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians, has served on the editorial advisory board of the Encyclopaedia Britannica; in 1978 he edited the sixth edition of Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians.

In the field of music theory, Slonimsky's Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns, first published in 1948, has attained singular popularity among jazz players.

Slonimsky continues to compose. His first work published in the United States was a piano suite Studies in Black and White, issued by New Music in 1928. His latest is an album of fifty Minitudes for piano. As the title indicates, these are tiny, almost microscopic pieces.

Today, Nicolas Slonimsky lives in Los Angeles, in an apartment near the UCLA campus. His companion is a loyal feline, Mango, and he enjoys a constant stream of friends and acquaintances from the musical world. There is a sturdy upright piano on which he is apt to give an exhibition of some contraclavicembalístico-acrobatic feat, above which is placed a blow-up of an authentic photograph of the skull of Johann Sebastian Bach. Slonimsky greets the visitor with caution and curiosity. Then there is light and friendliness. There is volubility. And always, ever, there are memories of St. Petersburg long, long ago.

Thomas F. Bertonneau



## INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER: Thomas Bertonneau, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program. General student of music history, particularly contemporary. BA candidate, Scandinavian languages, University of California, Los Angeles.

### TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Home of Nicholas Slonimsky, 10847 3/4 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles.

Dates: March 12, 15, 17, 19, 23, 25, April 7, 9 [video session], 1977.

Time of day, length of sessions, and total number of recording hours: The interviews took place in the afternoons and averaged two hours in length. Approximately thirteen hours were recorded.

Persons present during interview: Slonimsky and Bertonneau. Joel Gardner operated equipment at the video session.

### CONDUCT OF THE INTERVIEW:

The interviewer prepared for the sessions by reading extensively in the history of twentieth-century music, particularly the 1920s and 1930s. He familiarized himself with all available publications of the subject's works.

The interview followed a chronological format. The interviewer began by asking Dr. Slonimsky to discuss his early years in Russia, his introduction to music, then to recount his emigration and travels, which finally brought him to the United States. He described his relationship with Sergei Koussevitzky and Charles Ives, including comments on early performances of that composer's music. Finally, Slonimsky was asked to discuss his compositions, performances, and publications.

### EDITING:

Editing was done by Lawrence Weschler, Assistant Editor, Oral History Program. He checked the



verbatim transcript against the original tape recordings and edited for punctuation, spelling, paragraphing, and verification of proper and place names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed. The final transcript remains in the same order as the original taped material.

The manuscript was reviewed and approved by Dr. Slonimsky. He made a few minor deletions and additions, and he supplied names not previously verified.

The index was prepared by Deborah Young, Assistant Editor, Oral History Program. The introduction was written by the interviewer. Other front matter was prepared by Program staff.

#### SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings, video tape, and edited transcript of the interview are in the University Archives and are available under the regulations governing use of permanent noncurrent records of the University.

Records relating to this interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.



TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

MARCH 12, 1977

BERTONNEAU: Dr. Slonimsky, I think since you are a lexicographer, it might be appropriate to start with just the lexicographic facts of your life: your date of birth and the circumstances of your early life.

SLONIMSKY: Well, I can say that I was born on three different dates, in three different places--which is a rather strange statement, but it happens to be a statement of fact, because I was born on April 15, 1894, in St. Petersburg. Now, that was according to the old Julian calendar, which was in force in Russia and in all countries that were adherents to the Greek Orthodox Church. Now, this date corresponded to April 27 in the West, in the nineteenth century.

But, in the twentieth century, this difference between the two calendars, the old Julian calendar used in Russia and the new Gregorian calendar used in the civilized world (as distinct from Russia), the difference increased by a single day, because in Russia the year 1900 was a leap year, but not in the West. There was no February 29 in 1900 in the West, but there was one in Russia. As a result, the difference increased to thirteen days. So according to twentieth century calculation, I was born on the twenty-eighth of April. So here you are: fifteenth of April, twenty-seventh of April, or twenty-eighth of April.





Now, I said three different places--also true. I was born in St. Petersburg. In 1914, when the First World War broke out, the Czarist government decided that it was not seemly to have the capital of Russia--St. Petersburg was the capital of Russia--bear a German name. Of course, the German name was given by the founder of St. Petersburg, Peter the Great, who was very much under the German influence. So it was changed to Petrograd, which is a translation, the grad being the Russian word for city, and Petro, of course, referring to Peter the Great. So it was "city of Peter." Well, in 1924, Lenin died, and the Council of People's Commissars, as the Soviet government was then known, decided that Petrograd should henceforth be named Leningrad, in honor of Lenin, who after all had something to do with Leningrad--Petrograd--St. Petersburg becoming a city of the revolution.

So, this is my introduction. Well, I admit it is somewhat whimsical but, as I say, factually not untrue, since you said that I am a lexicographer and I have to deal with the true facts. Well, they are doctored facts, but not untrue.

BERTONNEAU: In reading about Russia, and particularly Petersburg at the turn of the century, I am struck by the fact that a great many of the commentators on that place in time in history characterize St. Petersburg as indeed a city of dreams, or a fairy-tale city. I would like to ask you about your Petersburg upbringing. Perhaps we can talk first about your



family and the house in which you lived?

SLONIMSKY: Well, you see, I belonged to a family that was very typical of the Russian intelligentsia. Now, the word intelligentsia in itself is a monster. Why intelligentsia? It's simply a Russian word from Latin meaning intelligence. So how come that the Russian distortion of a Latin word has become a part of the English language, in fact the vocabulary of languages all over the world? Because intelligentsia assumed the peculiar semantic nuance: it was no longer just intelligence or a circle characterized by intellectualism, but it became a particularly defined type of intellectual circle in Russia. It is impossible to talk about the intelligentsia of New York or Los Angeles, except for the purpose of ridicule. But when you speak of Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy or others, you speak of intelligentsia. I would rather withdraw the name of Tolstoy, because he didn't belong to any intelligentsia. For one thing, intelligentsia have to be very poor; this was one feature of it. Of course, Dostoyevsky was poor, but Tolstoy had an estate--he was a Count Tolstoy--so that was a different thing. He never lived in St. Petersburg; he lived in his estate near Moscow, and then in Moscow itself. So I was product of the intelligentsia in this particular circumscribed meaning, and it connotes both admirable qualities and qualities that are not so admirable. Now, the admirable qualities of the Russian intelligentsia



were their absolute devotion and absolute honesty in pursuing their ideals. But qualities that were not so admirable were a certain hesitation in pursuing those ideals and a complete lack of practical ability to carry them out.

BERTONNEAU: Oblomov, the novel by [Ivan] Goncharov, is about that, isn't it?

SLONIMSKY: Well, Oblomov is a different type, you see. He was not a member of the intelligentsia at all; he was just a lazy person. He belonged to the landed gentry, and he was not confined to that particular circle in St. Petersburg.

[The name] Oblomov became a synonym of an idle person who lived off his estate. So it's quite different from the intelligentsia of St. Petersburg. Of course, there was a circle of intelligentsia in Moscow, but if you want to pinpoint the center, the epicenter of the intelligentsia, then it was St. Petersburg. No, Dostoyevsky was the singer of the intelligentsia--confused, moralistic, and yet immoral, beset by contradictions (this was typical intelligentsia)--whereas Maxim Gorky was not. In fact, he was anti-intelligentsia, because he came out of the people.

BERTONNEAU: What of your family itself?

SLONIMSKY: My family, as I said, was a case of intelligentsia, par excellence. I remember when I was very small, I knew that progress of a young man or a young woman was first to go to school, then to write a book, then to go to jail for having



written a book. [laughter] This of course was a bitter joke, but not entirely a joke. I remember, when I was a small child, I remember the visits, the raids of the St. Petersburg police, usually consisting of huge peasantlike bearded men who were looking for books, looking for subversive books. Anything was subversive that had a foreign origin or had something to do with the ideas of reform, freedom, or anything.

Now, my father [Leonid Slonimsky] was an economist and a writer on political questions. He was the editor of the foreign department of the Russian magazine significantly called The Messenger of Europe--not any Russian message, but The Messenger of Europe, which immediately indicated liberalism of the outlook and a connection with Europe. There is no such magazine in any country that I can think of. For instance, the Atlantic Monthly in the nineteenth century was a similar magazine, a similar monthly. But, you see, the Atlantic Monthly did not have to relate or defer to Europe; it was just the Atlantic Monthly: that is, both America and Europe were in it. But my father's publication--as I say, he was foreign editor of it--was very significantly called The Messenger of Europe. Now, he was a writer. He was the first in Russia to publish a book on Karl Marx, if you please, in the Russian language--the very first, in 1898. And the book at that time was very significant because little was





known about Karl Marx in Russia at that time. Of course, the intelligentsia who could read German read about Karl Marx in the German press or read Karl Marx himself. And I remember seeing a copy of my father's book annotated by Tolstoy, no less, read by Tolstoy. Undoubtedly Lenin read and studied that book, too. So there are all kinds of connections, both visible and invisible.

Just what the implications of this intelligentsia in St. Petersburg were in relation to the Russian Revolution is difficult to tell. But the Russian Revolution undoubtedly was centered in St. Petersburg rather than Moscow. St. Petersburg rather than Moscow. St. Petersburg was the place where in 1825 liberal aristocrats decided that Nicholas I should not inherit the throne after the death of Alexander I and started this famous rebellion that became known as the December Rebellion; they themselves became known as the Decemberists, one of those landmarks in Russian history. But let me not talk about Russian history, because otherwise I will be completely sidetracked. [laughter]

St. Petersburg was, as I said, the epicenter of liberal thought and eventually the Revolution. And of course the Revolution of 1917 took place in St. Petersburg: this was the seat of the government, and the government of the czar was overthrown in February 1917.

BERTONNEAU: This is something that I want to talk about a



little bit later, because I think it's interesting enough that it deserves some attention. I want to stick to the subject of your family right now.

SLONIMSKY: So, so much for the family. Now, my father's father was a famous Jewish scholar, astronomer, mathematician, and writer. His name was Chaim Selig Slonimsky, but he spent most of his life in Poland. See, my family eventually came from Poland, ultimately. Now his name is well known in scholarly circles, and he must have been an extraordinary person because he was given very much to abstract speculation. I published an article about him recently which recounts his many curious inventions and ideas. [Commentary, January 1977]

But to come closer to my immediate family, my mother [Faina] was one of the first women who went to a Russian university. Among others, she studied chemistry with Borodin, the composer, who was also a professor of chemistry. And my parents and my various uncles and aunts were very much involved in all kinds of liberal activities. Of course, those liberal activities were very naive in a way; it was mostly talking, not acting. But this was the atmosphere in which I was brought up. Now, what else?

BERTONNEAU: Did you have any brothers and sister?

SLONIMSKY: Yes, I had plenty of them. I had two brothers. I'm the last of the Mohicans: no one is left now of my immediate family. I had two brothers, both of whom were



engaged in literary activities. My older brother [Alexander] was a literary critic and in a way investigator of the Russian style of literature. My younger brother was a typically Soviet product. He never joined the Communist party, but he allied himself with the advanced ideas of the Communist party without joining it. In fact, he was attacked by Stalin's minions in 1948 for being too liberal, for allowing a certain latitude of thinking and discussion. He's a well-known novelist, and if you go to the library, you'll find a card file on him--his name was Michael--a lot of works published in Russian and also translated into German and some other languages, but not into English, as far as I can tell.

BERTONNEAU: In the sleeve notes to one of the albums you made with the Orion company, you begin with the rather startling statement that at the age of six your mother informed you that you were a genius. You said that this had quite an effect on your early adolescence. Could you tell us more about that?

SLONIMSKY: Of course, it's very difficult to recall impressions of childhood without editing them. Now it seems ridiculous to me--the whole thing appears as ludicrous. But just what effect it produced on me at that time, I am unable to judge. But certainly it was just the most hideous thing to do to any child in the light of our present understanding



of what childhood is. And as I say, I can no longer recall what the effect was on me, not that I was told that I was a genius, but I had to perform the role of a genius, which was much more difficult. If I [had been] told that I was a genius just as a person would say, well, a person is of noble origin, or the person is an heir to the throne or anything, then this is something that doesn't depend on his own accomplishments. But if I was a genius, I have to produce, and that, I suppose, precipitated a very, very difficult period of my early adolescence. Because since I was a genius, then I apparently decided that I didn't have to do what other non-geniuses do, meaning work. [laughter] So I even stopped practicing piano, because geniuses don't have to do manual labor. All they have to do is just project their genius. (Now, if I were writing a psychological or a sociological essay, I would perhaps draw a parallel between this kind of genius who doesn't have to work, perhaps, with the geniuses of contemporary music in America, where geniuses are created without any knowledge, but really with an innate ability to shriek, scream, croon, or just project themselves on the podium. The entire rock culture does not require any knowledge, any ability, any appeal to the finer elements of senses, but purely physical attributes. Now, of course, devotees of rock will tell me that I'm all wrong, but I think that a parallel holds true with that.)





Now, the difficulty of my situation was that our family, as all families of the intelligentsia in Russia, was poor. That is, the earnings of my father by writing or the earnings of my brother by teaching were very small. We never owned an estate; we never had the security that came from either nobility or simply success. I mean the kind of success that, I repeat, comes very easily in the United States, or in Europe for that matter, with a person who has some ability, let's say to play the trumpet or an accordion, or improvise a little tune or strum the guitar. And if he or she just happens to hit it off for some reason that nobody can explain, then really he or she doesn't have to work; all they have to do is just relax and improvise and contemplate their own navels and admire themselves or be fed on the admiration of others. Now, this was not my situation, no matter what my mother told me when I was six years old. So this eventually created a certain conflict. For instance, other geniuses became more notable or more visible than I was, and perhaps there was some element of trauma. I don't have to tell you that the worst thing that a parent can inflict on a child is to suggest that that child is a genius and therefore he or she is a person apart and does not have to be a member of the crowd. This happens only in the families of the intelligentsia or in the royal families, strangely enough. So there is a parallel.



BERTONNEAU: You said, in those same notes, that your mother once visited the classroom where you were attending school and delivered a rather odd lecture to your classmates.

Would you describe that?

SLONIMSKY: Yes. Now, this actually happened, because I was nine years old at that time, so the memory remained. She notified the teacher--it was one of those progressive schools, at the time shortly before the first revolution of 1905 when there were real progressive schools in Russia--she told the teacher that I was a pianist, that my fingers were precious instruments, that I was not to participate in rough games, I was not to be physically disturbed by my classmates, and I was to be treated with kid gloves and generally set apart as a person made of porcelain or some such fragile material. And I do remember until this day that as a child, I thought of this as a privilege. Therefore when another child tripped me, I immediately went to the teacher and complained. I cried most convincingly, and I think my classmate was probably punished for it, for the crime of tripping me. Well, this sort of thing--of course, as I said before, I'm not trying to create a sociological essay, but you can imagine what effect it must have produced.

BERTONNEAU: Slightly traumatic, I imagine.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. And of course then I had to solve certain problems for myself, and since I was completely concentrated



on the idea of conquering the world intellectually, I could not learn what every child learns by very simple effort, like swimming or any kind of physical activities, because physical activities in that particular milieu were regarded as inferior. Don't let me lecture on the really hideous type of society that existed before the Revolution--and I suspect exists even after the Revolution now--I mean, this total dedication to intellectualism as the only power that has any value. I remember that my family and my relatives and my intellectual friends of the older generation regarded people who engaged in mercantile professions as being basically inferior. And that must have created a very curious situation because we really existed as the intelligentsia existed only as an outgrowth of the [fact that the] mercantile world of Russia could indulge in intellectual activities. Again there is a parallel: many great artistic undertakings were the products of very rich men in Russia who acquired their wealth not by intellectual pursuit, but by exploiting labor in the most obvious way. Again there is a parallel between those rich men in Russia and people like [Andrew] Carnegie or [J.P.] Morgan or [John] Rockefeller here in America, who after they had gathered all this capital were perfectly willing to give part of it for something that they never had, the intellectual power of ideas. And curiously enough, there were also millionaires in Russia who actually



contributed money to revolutionary parties. And again. . . .

[clock sounds]

BERTONNEAU: There was a slight interruption while the cuckoo clock marked noon. You were saying just before we were interrupted that . . .

SLONIMSKY: That there was a. . . . So this, as I say, this really doesn't concern myself or my family in particular except to emphasize my family belonged to a class of society that was neither proletarian nor capitalist, certainly not of nobility and yet not of peasants. That's why the term intelligentsia fits that particular society so well.

BERTONNEAU: I see. Now, about the same time you started school, I understand that you began to take piano lessons from a very famous relative of yours.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. My mother's sister, Isabelle Vengerova, whose name is familiar to practically every musician and every pianist in this country because when she left Russia after the Revolution, after she came to the United States, she taught at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. And among her students were Leonard Bernstein, Samuel Barber, Gary Graffman, and a number of famous pianists and composers.

BERTONNEAU: You've also said, I think, that you discovered very early that you had perfect pitch.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. Well, this is one of my favorite topics.





I claim that perfect pitch cannot be cultivated, that perfect pitch is something you are born with. But it doesn't mean that you are particularly gifted for music, because you don't have to have perfect pitch to play the piano, for instance--or the violin, for that matter. There are many great pianists and great violinists who don't have it, not to mention composers. But if you have perfect pitch, that certainly was a precondition of your becoming a musician; I mean, you couldn't escape it, because the sense of absolute pitch meant the immediate cognizance of every note that is played or sung. This, of course, I have until this day--it is never lost, and it is never acquired--a very, very curious quality which I compare simply with the optical sensation of colors. Now, to my mind the person who doesn't have that perfect pitch, or absolute pitch, is tone deaf, just as a person who cannot tell red from blue is color-blind. You are not color-blind, are you?

BERTONNEAU: I must confess that I am. I have a very difficult time distinguishing between reds and greens.

SLONIMSKY: But how do you drive?

BERTONNEAU: Well, I know that the green light is on the bottom and the red light is on top.

SLONIMSKY: Is that so? It's most interesting. I mean, in a way I don't know--I mean, I cannot imagine. But it is parallel to the inability of telling the exact pitch. So



in your case, you can see the parallel. If you can't tell green from red, and if you can't tell C from C-sharp, you are deprived of some kind of immediate sense, just as, let's say, you couldn't tell round from square. (Of course, we don't see round objects as round objects; usually they are ellipses and so forth.) But this certainly made me extremely sensitive to musical sounds.

BERTONNEAU: Was it your aunt that discovered this facility?

SLONIMSKY: I think that she must have, because, you see, I don't remember the time when I was not aware that a certain note played at the piano. . . . When she played at the piano and I listened, to me it was like identifying letters or, even more, like identifying colors. So it predated my knowledge of notes or even my ability to read the alphabet.

BERTONNEAU: So you must have started the piano when you were around five or six?

SLONIMSKY: Well, as a matter of fact, I have a curious memory for dates, and I believe that the first lesson I took from my aunt was on November 6, 1900, according to the old Russian calendar. I was six years old. That was a regular lesson. Of course, I have this advantage of having had perfect pitch, although, again, it's a mystery what perfect pitch has to do with the ability of manipulating one's fingers. But don't let me go into that, because it is a fascinating subject which I've been trying to explain for



years and years, and I don't believe that it can be explained.

BERTONNEAU: What kind of music would be played in your house. What kind of music, as the saying goes, was in the air at the time?

SLONIMSKY: My aunt was the only one who played piano. My mother played the piano like any person of some education, and then my father didn't play any instrument and had very little understanding or appreciation for music. So this was the only music I ever heard, and this music represented the tradition of German romantic music, because my aunt was educated in Vienna. So she brought with her the music of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schumann. This was the music I heard. There are certain tunes that I remember until this day which I can no longer identify, tunes by forgotten composers that I heard when I was a child. And in one of my recent compositions ["Déjà Entendu"] I incorporated this tune that I remembered since I was a child of five or six, and I could never find out what it was. So I wrote a short variation on this childhood tune in a series of compositions which I call Minitudes, minimal etudes.

BERTONNEAU: Yes. Minimal etudes. And you also eventually entered the St. Petersburg Conservatory of Music.

SLONIMSKY: My aunt was a teacher in that conservatory of music; so she imported me to that conservatory, and I



continued to study with her. Then I picked up some general academic classes in composition with pupils of Rimsky-Korsakov. I arrived on the scene too late for Rimsky-Korsakov, who died in 1908. So I studied with his pupils. And I received excellent training. This conservatory certainly was not permissive, as I regret to say some American conservatories are nowadays. And I know whereof I speak, because I taught at those conservatories.

BERTONNEAU: Who were some of these pupils?

SLONIMSKY: Their names are very little known. I could give them to you, but it would be completely meaningless. Only those who follow Russian music very closely and made research of publications of Russian music seventy years ago would know those names. Suppose I just tell you that those names belonged to the circle of the Russian music publisher named Belaiev, who published all those Russian works--not in Russia but in Leipzig, because Russia was very deficient in matter of music publishing.

BERTONNEAU: This was Mitrofan Belaiev?

SLONIMSKY: Yes. He was a rich industrialist, and he gave money to establish a publishing house. Now those works would have never been published if it weren't for his money.

BERTONNEAU: I think [Alexander] Scriabin, for example, was with this publisher.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, Scriabin, he endowed Scriabin. He took him abroad; he gave him money. And then after he died in 1904,





Scriabin was in a terrible situation. And all those works were published in magnificent editions in Leipzig, because German engraving was--in the nineteenth century, German engraving was ne plus ultra. It was just absolutely magnificent. Now when you pick up a newly published work of music it is so shoddy; you pick up a Belaiev edition of eighty years ago and it still literally shines. The notes shine, they are so clear, they are engraved so deeply with such excellent ink. Unfortunately, the music that was engraved was not of very great significance.

BERTONNEAU: Not always, but then. . . .

SLONIMSKY: But still, all the operas of Rimsky-Korsakov were published in that edition, much music by [Modest] Mussorgsky and others. So the edition, the Belaiev edition itself, was a work of art.

BERTONNEAU: Now, was Belaiev connected in some way with the conservatory, or only insofar as he was publishing music?

SLONIMSKY: No, he had no connection with the conservatory. He simply supplied the money, and he also established prizes for best compositions. Rimsky-Korsakov was the judge of it, one of the judges of the Belaiev prizes.

BERTONNEAU: I think you said that [Alexander] Glazunov was. . . .

SLONIMSKY: Yes, Glazunov was the director of the conservatory.



BERTONNEAU: Oh, I see, and you--correct me if I'm wrong-- I think you've written that you auditioned before Glazunov when you entered the conservatory.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, when I was fourteen years old.

BERTONNEAU: And he gave you--what is it?--a 5-plus.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, a 5-plus, because I had absolute pitch.

I remember--or maybe I remember the memory of remembering-- I remember that first his student and his son-in-law, Maximilian Steinberg, gave me a single note. Then he gave me a very simple chord. Of course, I named all the notes right off. Then he called in Glazunov. And to Glazunov, a perfect pitch was the conditio sine qua non; that was the beginning and the end of all musical talent. So he gave me a fairly complex dissonant chord which he liked himself, and which he used in his works, a chord consisting of five different notes. I named all five, and that was that. I didn't have to go through any test anymore because I proved that I was musical.

BERTONNEAU: Now, you studied piano as your chief subject.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. I studied piano with my aunt, who was a professor at the St. Petersburg conservatory.

BERTONNEAU: And was it your ambition at the time to become a concert pianist?

SLONIMSKY: My ambition when I was very young was to become a concert pianist; and particularly it was my aunt's ambition,



who, to the end of her days, thought that nobody could play Chopin or Schumann with such romantic expression as I could. Well, it was probably a delusion, but still I. . . .



TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO

MARCH 12, 1977

BERTONNEAU: I think we were talking about your career as a piano student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, and you said that it was your aunt's and not your own ambition that you would become a concert pianist.

SLONIMSKY: Well, this was my ambition obviously because this was the only thing that I could do that others could not do--I mean "others" meaning the multitudes. At the same time, I was also moved towards a literary career; I mean, I wanted to write books, since practically every member of my family had written books. So this was another side of my psychology. But above all I wanted to be a pianist, because it satisfied some kind of vanity that existed in me as a child. Again, I say I have to recite the memories of remembrance of ancient recollections, so I don't know what was truly present in my brain and what wasn't, because of course it's very easy for me now to regard this thing as either ludicrous or downright dangerous to mental health--I mean this business of being told that I was a genius and being forced to live up to that definition; and even without anybody's telling me that I was a genius, I assumed this attitude. And again I say "genius," quote-unquote three times over, because the word genius was used loosely about anybody who had an ability such as playing the





piano.

I remember then that I was very much humiliated, made unhappy, when I found out that other boys of my own age actually outstripped me. I remember particularly one case which is an extraordinary case, a very poignant one. I remember that a little Spanish boy came to St. Petersburg and gave a concert. I remember his name to this day. His name was Pepito Ariola, and he wore short velvet pants, just as I did, and he was about ten years old, and he gave a whole concert. Now, I couldn't do that, but he played a whole concert. He also played unfamiliar Spanish pieces, not just Schumann and Chopin but strange pieces. And he was completely composed, in the sense of being collected. He was there on the stage without fear, in perfect behavior, without any nervousness, as I was a nervous child (I was a nervous child obviously because of the pressure imposed on me). So I said to myself then that it was no use for me to try to compete with a genius who could actually present a whole concert and be admired by conservatory teachers and so forth.

Now, the reason I mention this name at all was because about sixty years later, the editor of the magazine called Etude, to which I contributed--and he was a very remarkable person; his name was James Francis Cooke--he told me about an old man whom he met in Spain who used to be very celebrated.



He said that he used to be a brilliant pianist and now he lived alone in Barcelona and needed help, and his name was Pepito Ariola. He had all kinds of afflictions, all kinds of illnesses, and could I do something to help him or organize some kind of aid to him? Now, this was quite extraordinary. This was quite a joke to me, because this was the Pepito Ariola whom I heard when I was nine and he was nine; and I was still very active twenty years ago, and this Pepito Ariola was dying in Barcelona of all kinds of diseases connected with senility. Incidentally, I could never find out what happened to him, you know, because he just completely vanished from the world. He was famous sixty years--seventy years ago, I must say now--but then he just disappeared, vanished. So it's ironic: now my name is more or less known; it's in every dictionary (practically in every music dictionary anyway), and I even made the Encyclopaedia Britannica through a word that I invented which is included in the Encyclopaedia Britannica--so I am on the surface, but Pepito Ariola, who was the object of my envy when I was a small child, well, he's probably dead, and I can't even find out when and where he died because he's so completely unknown. Now, this is just a sidelight on this situation of homegrown geniuses, real geniuses, and homemade geniuses. But this is what happened.

In a way I can say that I didn't do so badly, because



at that time if anyone had told me--not even when I was nine, but when I was nineteen, or for that matter when I was twenty-five--that I would eventually come to America, that I would publish books in a language that I couldn't even read when I was a child, that I could compose music that would be published, and that my name would be known, at least among musicians--well, I would say this was kind of a ridiculous unfunny dream . . . and yet it's a fact. Just why I'm not dancing with joy I don't know, I suppose because I'm no longer nine years old.

BERTONNEAU: You give the impression of being somewhat astonished by it, even at this point.

SLONIMSKY: Well, I am astonished, but see, the worst of it is that I am no longer contemplating my own image with tremendous self-joy--see, that is the worst of it, you see. All I think of now is in terms of meeting the deadlines, of completing my books in time, getting my compositions published and recorded if possible, or whatever. But you see, there is no longer this impression that here is me in short velvet pants appearing before the great of this world and Glazunov telling his associates that I have an extraordinary sense of perfect pitch and so forth. All this is gone. So what's the use of having those books with my name on it or my photographs in various publications and so forth? At the age of nine, or at the age of fifteen possibly,



nineteen, this would have been enough to keep me happy twenty-four hours a day, or more.

BERTONNEAU: That's one of the ironies of time, I suppose. Who were some of the other people with you in the conservatory who were wearing short pants at the time?

SLONIMSKY: Well, for instance, I remember Jascha Heifetz was actually--well, not my generation but actually a little younger. I remember him in short pants. I remember him coming there and playing; I remember him coming into my class and playing and asking me to give him a chord to tune his violin and so forth. But this is a memory that is so far in the past that it's difficult to associate this situation with the present Jascha Heifetz who lives in Los Angeles and refuses to appear in public, probably the greatest name in the violin world of the century. So, now there was no comparison with luminaries like him or like [Gregor] Piatigorsky, who recently died, the cellist; and all those people, you know, they were of my generation. And I remember some of them as young boys in short pants.

BERTONNEAU: Did the curriculum at the Petersburg conservatory consist of things beside music? Did you have to study, let's say, for example, geography or mathematics or something. . . ?

SLONIMSKY: Well, you see, I went to high school, so I didn't take those obligatory classes. The conservatory classes were very, very poor in academic classes, but I was a fairly good





student in high school, and high schools in Russia were built on the German model. They were really excellent. When I remember what we had to know and what we had to study--the languages, the history, the geography--we had to know something. So even now sometimes I remember certain things. For instance, a lot of Latin expressions that I absorbed as a boy--they're all vivid to me. I don't have to translate them; they are just part of my own intellectual world. And this sort of thing I received from Russian teachers; most of them were either educated in Germany or followed the strict German model. Russia was very much Germanized before the First World War.

BERTONNEAU: This was especially true in St. Petersburg, wasn't it?

SLONIMSKY: Yes, there was a large German colony in St. Petersburg, two excellent German high schools, where all instruction was conducted in German. Two or three German newspapers were published in St. Petersburg. I should say the German influence was very beneficial, because it was perhaps a little pedantic, but it was strict. Now I sound almost like an old fogey, but when I realized through my own teaching that I had to specify in what country Vienna was, or things like that, you know, then I realized how much we had to know at a very early age. And the same in composition classes. I remember that when I was fifteen that I had to compose a very difficult piano prelude with specified



modulations according to strict rules, and I find that now this kind of strictness is no longer preserved. The result is that maybe, maybe there is a greater freedom of composition, but at the same time there is a lack of basic education, the same [as with] the general curriculum, which you know only too well--the discussion of the inadequacy of schools is going on all the time. But in Russia, at that time, we really had to know something: there was absolutely no permissiveness. As I say, perhaps in a way it was bad for us because we had to follow a well-defined path in our education. But, on the other hand, it was wonderful that we had to study all this, and that we had to know precisely what we had to know.

BERTONNEAU: Now, as I understand it, there was a kind of split in Russian music that began in the middle of the nineteenth century between composers who were oriented more toward German or European music, and the nationalists, who. . . .

SLONIMSKY: Yes, of course.

BERTONNEAU: What school was dominant at the Petersburg conservatory?

SLONIMSKY: At the Petersburg conservatory, the nationalist school. No question about it, because Glazunov was the last heir of the Russian national school. And so this school was predominant. It is true that Italian and German influences were very strong in the middle of the nineteenth century, but after that . . . [phone rings; tape recorder turned off]



This is off the subject. I mean, you want to talk about my own life, and if I go into the nineteenth century and start discussing those subjects, we'll be way off.

BERTONNEAU: All right. Then I know something that I would like to ask because it's so tantalizing. You said that you gave piano lessons about this time to [Rita] the daughter of the Grand Duke Michael.

SLONIMSKY: Yeah.

BERTONNEAU: Could you tell us about it?

SLONIMSKY: Did I mention it in my notes?

BERTONNEAU: I think you said a little bit about it, but . . .

SLONIMSKY: I see. Well, that was a very strange, strange, strange period. See, in fact, my only source of income--I could earn my living only by giving piano lessons, since I never reached the point when I could give concerts that would draw an audience. And then after the Revolution, I played around at women's clubs and so forth; and then when I went abroad, I played in silent movies and sometimes restaurants in a trio or quartet (that was long before the availability of the talking movies and so forth). So there was this source for me, and piano lessons. And of course I had all kinds of students from various strata of society. Fortunately for me, music was a salable profession under any circumstances. For instance, when I decided to leave Russia after the Revolution, during the civil war, and I landed in



Constantinople, which was the last outlet for those Russians who decided not to stay, stay with the Bolsheviks. . . . And I didn't even make any decision; I was just driven south, driven by the wave of the civil war, and I found myself in Constantinople, with just about a shirt on my back and hardly anything else. But then the refugee authorities, mostly under the guidance of Herbert Hoover, who was a great, great man as far as refugees were concerned (he was minister of commerce then)--after the end of the First World War, he organized an extraordinary campaign to help people who were thrown off their countries. They would ask a person, say, a Russian, what he did, and he would say he was a poet. "All right, to the left." "What do you do?" "You're a musician? Musician, to the right. All right, a poet, philosopher, out."

BERTONNEAU: Because a musician had a salable . . .

SLONIMSKY: . . . a salable something, particularly those who could play something, whether piano or guitar or whatever. And so a pianist, I was given an immediate opportunity to accompany ballet dancers, play in a silent movie, play in a restaurant. As I say, it was a salable profession. But poets and philosophers--particularly in the Russian language--could do absolutely nothing.

BERTONNEAU: This was later. This was around . . .

SLONIMSKY: That was 1920.

BERTONNEAU: This is something that I would like to come back





to because I think it represents a really interesting phase in your life. But let's work up to it. Let's start at, say, the outbreak of World War I.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, well, I was twenty years old at the time, just turned twenty, and of course at first I didn't even realize what kind of a disruption that was. Theoretically, I was even drafted into the czar's army, except that I was in the music division so I didn't have to go to the front or anything. So I played the piano in various orchestras connected with the infantry. And then the Revolution broke out, and that was of course a tremendous event. I was in St. Petersburg; I was right there; I saw it all happen before my eyes. Really the final blow was the prohibition to soldiers to ride in streetcars without pay. See, then when the authorities of Petrograd began arresting those soldiers and taking them off of streetcars (there were no buses at the time), they rebelled and they called for help. They summoned the Imperial Regiment (it is supposed to be like the militia here or national guard), and they refused to arrest their comrades. [laughter] Actually, from my viewpoint, this is what happened. There wasn't any Lenin or anybody around. Lenin was in Switzerland at the time.

BERTONNEAU: Was this the February Revolution?

SLONIMSKY: The February Revolution, 1917.

BERTONNEAU: This was when [Alexander] Kerensky. . . .



SLONIMSKY: Yes, well, Kerensky was not known either. Kerensky was just a socialist member of the parliament. He was as little known as Jimmy Carter was three years ago. So this was a very, very curious situation. There was nobody there in Petrograd to take care of the situation. Maybe it's a cynical view, but as I say, I was right there at the center, and all I could see was that the soldiers were terribly disgruntled that they were not given those privileges they had enjoyed for a couple of years. But then they, of course, abused the privileges, riding street-cars, getting first place in lines, and the lines were already being formed to get bread and other things. So all of a sudden this reached the high echelons of government and, well, the czar had to abdicate and so forth. So this was the immediate jolt as far as I was concerned. Politics, of course, played a role, but not much of a role. Much closer were the physical creature comforts, particularly for soldiers, who after all carried guns and could really start trouble.

I left Petrograd when famine became unbearable. I remember my last impression was when a horse fell in the street and died, and the people rushed from their houses, from their yards, with kitchen knives, and proceeded to carve that horse. That was a terrible, terrible memory. And then there was just no food. I remember I had a



hallucination about a loaf of bread being in the cupboard while there couldn't have been any bread. Except that I was fortunate. Glazunov recommended me as a teacher to be in the family of a person who was in charge of distributing bread rations. And since so many people were dying, just dying of famine and malnutrition, then this particular distributor had those rations for dead people. So he accumulated quite a bit of bread and even butter. I remember I used to get a pound of bread for each lesson, which was extraordinary, a pound of black bread. Money hardly meant anything at all; it was just so many pieces of paper with numbers.

BERTONNEAU: Did the other members of your family leave Petrograd at the same time?

SLONIMSKY: Well, we all lived--first we lived there, then I left Petrograd alone, but other members of my family remained in Petrograd. And for two years I didn't even know whether they were living or dead, because Russia was completely cut off from the world during the civil war. And at that time both the Germans and the allies got together and tried to strangle the Bolshevik government. They did not succeed, of course. Again I find some parallels to that situation and the present situation--I mean, not present situation but the situation in the world two or three years ago. So I'm beginning to have that global picture



of the world. Well, anyway, that civil war, of course, disrupted everything. There was no way of living, getting anything. A simple infection or a flu--and of course, that was the time of the great flu epidemic, 1918, when something like 20 million people died in Russia, and also many died in their apartments of famine, just died.

So then I left. In July 1918, I left Petrograd, which was the worst place, and proceeded by freight train to the Ukraine, which was at that time occupied by Germany. The Germans were still there because it was at the very end of the First World War, and the allies were not even quite eager to get the Germans out of Russia. It also was a similar situation when--[Winston] Churchill was then also in the government. Towards the end of the First World War, Churchill began to be concerned about what would happen to Russia if the Germans--it's the same thing that happened at the end of the Second World War, of course. Well, anyway, the Soviet government proved that it was very viable and could resist all these things, and so theoretically I was delegated by the Soviet government, then just at its beginnings, to give concerts in the Ukrainian republic, which was supposedly an independent republic, but that was 1918, and it was really a government set up by the Germans, fed on the cause of Ukrainian nationalism--very confusing. Well, anyway, all we wanted was just to move away from the site of





famine and disease, and the Ukraine was always the source of bread in Russia, and so we could exist. And then, as I said, we all finally got out of Russia and. . . .

BERTONNEAU: You went to the Ukraine first by train?

SLONIMSKY: By freight train. There was no such thing as trains or anything. You just jumped on a freight train, and you went wherever you could go. Sometimes a train would stop for a whole day, and we didn't know where we were. Once the conductor came around and told all so-called passengers to get out and get some fuel, lumber, collect tree branches, and so forth in order to start the train because there was no coal left; I mean, nothing was left. [laughter] It was an interesting situation. I remember that from Kiev to Kharkov, which is a distance about the same as from Los Angeles to San Francisco, it took us twelve days. As I say, the train would stop, and we wouldn't even know where we were politically because there were not only the White Army and the Red Army, but there was also a Green Army, which consisted of Ukrainian peasants and undefined anarchists or something who were simply interested in robbery. Quite a situation. And I must say that, retrospectively, it's amazing that I survived, I mean physically survived, not to mention that people were being shot right and left just for anything.

BERTONNEAU: You lived in a building in Kiev, I think, that was raided once, and you described a situation in which



you literally talked your way out of an uncertain fate at the hands of the soldiers.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, I was pretty good. You see, I was very glib in my talk. I mean, I could take any situation and talk to those groups who were--most of them were misled by propaganda or confused, and I would talk their own language. And I also had a number of documents suitable for any occasion. As I say, I developed--I was in my early twenties, and I developed a certain virtuosity in meeting those situations. And also I had the sense of drama, and that's why perhaps I was never really afraid for my life, because I had the feeling of something highly dramatic and theatrical happening around me and not to me. I survived while millions died, not from actual combat or shooting but from disease, particularly typhoid fever and the flu. And of course I had my flu too, but I was fortunate that it happened in the Ukraine, where there was at least some bread and some medication. So I survived. After I got out of it, well, I found out that my family survived, too, amazingly enough under the circumstances. But for two years I didn't know whether any member of my family was living or dead.

BERTONNEAU: Because of the complete disruption of communications.

SLONIMSKY: Complete disruption of communications. There was no such thing as sending a letter or anything. Once in



a while, I would give a message to a sailor riding a freight train--why sailors rode trains, God only knows--to Petrograd, asking to send some products to my family.

BERTONNEAU: Just to get a message through.

SLONIMSKY: It was extremely difficult.

BERTONNEAU: Now, in Kiev for a while you were living with a number of other interesting people, including . . .

SLONIMSKY: . . . oh, yes, the Scriabin family. Yes, you see I became very friendly with them. You see, [Alexander] Scriabin died in 1915, and his wife, his widow, and the children moved to Kiev, and we all lived in the same house in this skyscraper in Kiev--skyscraper: six stories high (that was the biggest skyscraper in Russia). I organized a Scriabin society, and I managed to deal with the government officials who--at that time the Soviets took over Kiev. As I say, I was always clever to use intellectual arguments with these Soviet representatives. You couldn't do anything with the White Army, which was an organization supported by monarchists and people who didn't care for any intellectualism. But in the beginning, at least, the Soviets--in fact, not only in the beginning--they were basically a group of intellectuals. There weren't any peasants or workers--no matter what they said about its [being a] government of the workers and peasants, there wasn't a single worker or a peasant in their government. Certainly Lenin was no peasant;



neither was Trotsky, or any of them. So I was able to deal with them. Once I even sent a telegram to Lenin himself, asking him to intervene in this threatening eviction of the Scriabin family and myself and all our friends from that particular house, which was the best house in Kiev, so obviously every military organization, every military unit of the Soviet army wanted to evict the tenants and occupy it.

BERTONNEAU: The telegram did have an effect, didn't it?

SLONIMSKY: Well, I could never verify it, but the fact is that we were left alone.

BERTONNEAU: You were left alone after that.

SLONIMSKY: Yes.

BERTONNEAU: Was this Vera Scriabin, or was it Tatiana [Schloezer]?

SLONIMSKY: No, Tatiana. No, that was the second wife of Scriabin. Actually, he never divorced Vera, and I never met Vera Scriabin.

BERTONNEAU: So it was Tatiana who was in Kiev. And it was during this period that Scriabin's son Julian drowned on an outing.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, drowned. Yes, that was a tragic, tragic case. It sort of was the last blow to Scriabin's legacy of music. I don't know whether Julian, who was drowned when he was only eleven years old, would have really become a great composer, but he composed pieces in the style of





Scriabin and was remarkable for a little boy of eleven.

BERTONNEAU: Now, from Kiev you went to Novorossiysk.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, how do you know all that? Did I describe it in my little essay?

BERTONNEAU: Just a little bit.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, that was on the Black Sea. When I went to Kiev, at least there were some reason behind it; I had friends, and there was some sense of direction. But when I went to Novorossiysk, it was just getting out the nearest and the only way possible, because I tried to get on the Black Sea, and from the Black Sea to get away from Russia into Turkey or whatever country I could get into. So this was how I got there. It was a beautiful place. And then I went to the Crimea, where I lived for several months in the town of Yalta, which became famous, of course, because of the conference between Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin.

BERTONNEAU: And also you went to Constantinople.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, now it's called Istanbul. And in Constantinople--first of all, I was no longer under the threat of being shot or whatever, and the only problem was economic, and I managed to find enough work, mostly playing the piano. Then I moved into Bulgaria, Berlin, Paris, and finally I found a job in the United States fifty years ago.

BERTONNEAU: Could you describe just a little bit conditions in Istanbul--Constantinople?



SLONIMSKY: Well, Constantinople was a marvelous city with plenty of everything, food and luxury and theaters. To me it was a revelation after Russia. All of a sudden I moved into a world the existence of which I had forgot. I clearly remember the sight of horses, well-fed horses in the streets, something that I hadn't seen in Russia for three years. And of course automobiles that didn't exist-- I mean there were just military vehicles, no private automobiles in Russia at that time years ago, very few of them even now. So the impression was that of a tremendous revival. So that with just a few pennies I could get a dinner. I remember I went to the Alliance Francaise--there were all those foreign groups--and got dinner for sixty piasters, which was something like thirty cents, including red wine and bread, and all you could eat of white bread, another delicacy that seemed nonexistent. I couldn't even imagine having white bread, particularly without paying any amount for white bread. I even remember the French expression pain à volonté ("bread at will"). So then my problem was only to collect enough money to move on, and then I moved on.

BERTONNEAU: You went just to Bulgaria?

SLONIMSKY: Well, I spent some months in Bulgaria simply because of the geography of the situation. Then also I held a passport, that was just like a curse, like the sign



of Cain, saying "Russian stateless." I wasn't a Russian, I wasn't anything--"stateless"--so no country wanted to accept me. It was fortunate I could play the piano because there was some exception for musicians. Even in the United States, the limitations for emigration were tremendous, and because I was a pianist, I could state on my application, "Profession: Artist." Artists were exempt at that time, 1923, "exempt from quota," which was very important; so I was able to get a visa to come to the United States. Of course, before that I spent a couple of years in Paris, when I became secretary to [Serge] Koussevitzky, the famous conductor, and then [I came to] the United States, which was truly a promised land. I just couldn't believe it when I was offered the contract to be an accompanist to the Eastman School of Music for \$3,000 a year. Three thousand dollars: I couldn't believe that anybody short of Rockefeller could command a salary of \$3,000 a year!

BERTONNEAU: This was about 1921.

SLONIMSKY: In 1923, and then through 1924. So for \$3,000 a year, well, there was very little difference between me and Rockefeller as far as I could tell. [laughter] The amount was simply staggering.

BERTONNEAU: So you spent a year in Paris, then, before coming to the United States.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, and then I went back to Paris for a while,



and then. . . . Well, the rest would be just recounting my career which we'll have to do step by step together, and again I'll be asking you for guidance.





TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

MARCH 15, 1977

BERTONNEAU: I think the last time we were talking we had got you out of Constantinople, where you went as a refugee from what was then the Soviet Union during the civil war; and you had earned a living, so to speak, in Constantinople by playing the piano, as an accompanist in restaurants; and finally you decided to go to Paris. And what year was this?

SLONIMSKY: Well, that was 1921. I didn't get to Paris at once, you know; it wasn't so simple. For one thing, I had the most terrible type of documents certifying as to who I was. And to the world at large then, I was among perhaps half a million of others the worst possible creature, a person without any kind of state or any kind of government. Because I certainly didn't want to live under the reign of the White Army--well, anyway, the White Army was defeated--or in the first years of the Revolution, I certainly didn't care to go through all that misery and possible danger in what eventually became Soviet Russia or, more technically, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. So I was gradually gravitating towards Paris. Well, first there was Bulgaria, this neighbor state of Turkey. I went to Sofia, and in Sofia I spent maybe six or seven months, and I did practically the same thing: I played in silent



movies, I played in restaurants, and occasionally I had a couple of lessons or played in embassies, in consulates. For instance, the French Embassy had a soiree, and they invited me to provide classical music; so I provided the classical music all by myself or with a singer, usually a Russian singer. The Bulgarian language was very close to the Russian language; most Bulgarians spoke Russian, and I had no difficulties in understanding Bulgarian, or reading it, or even writing it. And then there was an opera company, and there I served as an accompanist and as a rehearsal pianist. In French, it was called répétiteur. Anyway, I had some kind of métier, which was very fortunate for me, because as I told you last time, the authorities in charge of refugees. . . . At that time the future-President Hoover played a great role; he really helped a great deal in organizing the problem of the refugees. Well, I was in the privileged position because I had a métier; I could do something that was salable. Others--poets, philosophers and writers in the Russian language, or even in some other languages--were helpless and unnecessary for the materialistic world to which we were all introduced. And so I was immediately placed on the right hand, almost like the Last Judgment: I was on the right, and those people were on the left who didn't have an ascertainable profession.

So after a few months in Bulgaria, I moved again west



through Yugoslavia and stayed for a while in Germany, and then finally got through northern Italy to France. I had friends in Paris, mostly Russians and Russians who had lived in Paris for many years with whom I was acquainted (or at least my family was acquainted). So I was not going into an entirely different, an unfamiliar world. And of course Paris was to me a magic world.

Well, I arrived in Paris and I entered contact with my friends, mostly Russians, mostly members of the literary world and of course of the music world. Then I faced the same problem: make a living. It was in a way more difficult than in Bulgaria or Turkey, because, see, there were so many pianists and excellent pianists and accompanists and people who could do what I was doing much better. Well, I got a few jobs. I was a rehearsal pianist for a while at the Diaghilev ballet [Ballet Russe]. [Sergei] Diaghilev was always of course in financial trouble, and I remember one day he came with a long face and looked at all of his ballerinas and helpers and said, "Well, I'd better tell you right away: I don't have any money. You won't get paid this week." [laughter] Which didn't feel so good, because it was the question of being paid in an affluent society or having had something to live on to begin with. For me, being paid in Paris meant being able to pay for a week of my lodging on the fifth floor of a small hotel in rue St.



Jacques on the Left Bank of the Seine, where students congregated, or else to have a decent meal once in a while and maybe buy a new shirt or something like this. So all those things really were quite, quite depressing. But see, I was determined to go on and on. Anyway I was driven by necessity; it wasn't any consideration of my being a genius or impressing the world. [laughter] The problem was simply survival, almost physical survival more than anything else. I remember once when I returned to my hotel, I found that the key was not on the hook; I was very much annoyed by it, and so I called the concierge and said, "Where's my key?" And the concierge said, "Very sorry. No key. You didn't pay this week." So I finally persuaded him to let me in, and the next morning I went around and managed to collect a few francs to pay at least for my room.

Well, it's difficult to imagine that kind of life now. I mean, when I'm telling this story, it appears either romantic or partly unbelievable, almost, to me, you know. I just can't understand why I was forced to do all this and why I wasn't a little bit more clever in arranging my affairs. But as I said, the competition was tremendous in Paris for even on such low echelons as piano accompanist-- which was my main profession because composition or any other things were not paying at all. I mean, piano playing





was just about the best anybody could do.

Well, now you were interested to know how I met Koussevitzky. Of course, Koussevitzky was at that time also in a way a refugee, but he was a very rich and a very famous refugee. He had a considerable fortune in Russia. He married a very rich woman, who financed his concerts in Russia. Of course, after the Revolution, they lost most of their holdings in Russia, but still they had enough in Paris to maintain a certain lifestyle that was convenient and suitable to his position in the musical world. He arranged concerts, so-called "Concerts Koussevitzky," under his own name. And this is what happened: I used to accompany a Russian singer [Alexander Mozzhukhin] who sang songs by Mussorgsky and Rachmaninoff, mostly Russian composers. I was a pretty good accompanist; in fact, I was a very good accompanist. Some people believed that I was a first-class accompanist and said so in the press. But this was nothing extraordinary either, because there were plenty of excellent accompanists in Paris, and again, as I say, the struggle for existence was fierce. Well, anyway, so I accompanied that singer and Koussevitzky came to that concert. Koussevitzky was not as famous as he looks to us now, fifty years after his first tenure in America. He was known, but not as celebrated as ever. And he was quite accessible. I mean, the very fact that he came to a concert by a Russian artist was



already a sort of a democratic gesture. Well, anyway, after the concert he went to see the singer, and then he spoke to me. He said he liked my accompaniments, and would I be interested in doing some work for him (meaning playing the piano while he practiced conducting)? Now, of course, to me it was an extraordinary opportunity, and I immediately said that I would be very much honored and would be very happy to do it, if I could.

Well, anyway, I was soon hired and played the piano for him. Now, he practiced conducting in a very curious way: he followed the score and then he actually beat time while the pianist--myself at that time, and before me there were several others, and after me there were two or three--played as best he could an arrangement of an orchestral score, which wasn't a very good solution. In fact, after I spent a couple of years with him, I couldn't understand how he could practice this way, because obviously the pianist could not give any kind of an impression of the orchestral sound. So there must have been some confusion in his ears after listening to this type of piano playing. I was not the best arranger of symphonic scores, but at least I could manage. And then there were always piano arrangements of symphonies and so forth which I could use.

My first job, strangely enough, was to play Le Sacre du Printemps, Stravinsky, which of course was at that time



and still is a tremendously difficult score and very difficult to play on the piano. I used the four-hand arrangement by Stravinsky himself, which has now been published and in fact performed as a curiosity. But I had to play it using just two hands, not four hands. Still I could manage, because in Stravinsky's score, the main thing was rhythm, and I managed those rhythms pretty soon. To me it was, of course, something very new and strange at that time, I was a youngster, and I had to learn to master those constantly changing rhythms. Now, strangely enough, Koussevitzky was almost helpless in this kind of thing that now any Juilliard student can do as a matter of course, because, you see, that was more than fifty years ago, and the musical world was totally different. Le Sacre du Printemps was almost inaccessible to an average musician or an average conductor. Pierre Monteux could master this score, and maybe a couple of other conductors, but conductors of the old generation simply didn't know how to approach the technical problems. The result was that Stravinsky himself even sometimes made mistakes in trying to conduct this score. With Koussevitzky it was quite a problem because he was not a prestidigitator of the baton. He lacked the virtuosity that nowadays young men take for granted. And I don't believe that I would be divulging any particular secrets to say that he was sometimes quite lost in this maze of sounds.



And I myself had great difficulty at first to understand it, and then I became tremendously interested in the problem, that is, in the intellectual problem of combining several rhythms and changing one meter to another, beating such measures as 5/16 or 7/16 or even 1/16, 1/8, and so forth, as in the final dance in Stravinsky's Le Sacre du Printemps. Well, we spent the whole summer in Biarritz, where Stravinsky also lived--that was the summer of 1922--and we practiced. Koussevitzky paid me--I don't now remember what particular sum of money, but I also had the privilege of having meals with him (I mean, that was part of my payment). It was quite an extraordinary circumstance, and for me it was a revelation--I mean, just to be with the celebrated conductor and work with him. At first I didn't notice his failings, but then I began asking myself how come a celebrated conductor could have difficulties in these metrical and rhythmical arrangements, and even in my mind I was apt to be skeptical about his capacities. However, I could not conduct even a bar of music in straight 4/4 time, and he could approach an orchestra and command it by kind of magic.

Well, anyway, so finally he came to conduct Le Sacre du Printemps, and he had tremendous difficulties with it. There was quite a mix-up in the orchestra, and he asked me how I managed to get those rhythms. So I began thinking of





rearranging the score for him so that he could conduct it in square time, so to speak. It wasn't too difficult to do. For instance, there was a bar of, let's say,  $3/16$ ths which was followed by a bar of  $5/16$ ths. All you had to do was to add them up: you would have  $8/16$ ths, which is  $4/8$ , which is  $2/4$ , which presented no difficulties. True, there were accents that were misplaced, but the score, and particularly the finale, was syncopated score. So this could be arranged as long as the downbeat could be made secure. Well, anyway, so I proposed it to him, and he said, "Well, you can't do that. I mean, this is a meter that was written out by Stravinsky, and it will ruin the work." So we had quite a discussion. I remember there was one point when after a long hold there was a rest, a quick rest, a sixteenth-note rest, and then a chord. So when the conductor gave the rest which came down on the beat and the chord was off the beat, the orchestra had tremendous difficulties in coming in off. Well, I suggested that this rest was not necessary except on paper, and it could simply be eliminated, since there was a hold anyway which gave the duration of the previous note an indeterminate value, [that one could] just start on the chord without counting that purely theoretical rest. And then there were a few other things that I thought might help. He thought it was interesting, but he dismissed it. But then, after the first rehearsal, when he was completely lost, he



came back to me (I mean, I lived with him or around him in Paris and Biarritz) and asked me what I had to propose and what my idea was. So I took the score, and I rearranged all those bars in blue pencil, and I indicated to him how easy it would be to conduct it. He was very much impressed, and he said, "Well, let's try. Let's rewrite all the parts," which wasn't too difficult, because all you had to do was rearrange the bar lines. It was done, and he came to rehearsal and said, "It's wonderful. It works. I have no difficulty whatsoever." Now, there were occasional changes of meter, but basically I arranged it so that the meter was binary (that is, 2/4) or ternary (that is, 3/4) or whatever. And interestingly enough, he used my rearrangement, so to speak, which was of course a secret matter, throughout his career in conducting Le Sacre du Printemps. And the library of the Boston Symphony Orchestra still has that score with my lines in blue pencil, rearranging the meter.

Well, this was one of the many experiences I had with Koussevitzky, and in the meantime I was learning fast about compositions, new compositions, scores, and even conducting. I was helpless as a conductor. When I tried to beat time, I could not correlate my time beating with the sound I heard. I certainly had no ambition to be a conductor. Well, then Koussevitzky received his engagement in Boston as conductor at the Boston Symphony Orchestra--that was 1924. And in the



meantime I had gone to Rochester, where I was the coach of the so-called American Opera Company.

BERTONNEAU: You were extended this invitation while you still were in Paris. How did this come about?

SLONIMSKY: Yes. Well, this is how it happened: in Paris I met a Russian tenor whose name was Vladimir Rosing. He was quite a character, a very talented man who could never sing in time. [laughter] But he had a theory about singing Russian songs that was very interesting, and he impressed critics, and he was actually successful, particularly in London and Paris, because Russian songs were something new and he had an idea that he had to assume the facial expression of the character in the song. So when he sang Mussorgsky's macabre Songs of the Dead, you know, he tried to make himself look like a skull, and so forth. It was ridiculous in a way, but it was fifty years ago, and such things impressed audiences. Anyway, he was quite successful. I don't remember where we met, but we met in one of these Russian gatherings in Paris, and he said he was looking for an accompanist. Would I accompany him? Sure I would accompany him. So we went to Belgium and to various cities in France, and I played his accompaniments. He was a nice guy, except he was completely unreliable in many ways. But then he somehow persuaded George Eastman, no less, whom he met on the boat while going on a tour in America, he persuaded him to give him money to start



an opera company which would perform exclusively in the English language, which was a novelty. It still is a novelty. [laughter] George Eastman was an interesting person (I met him subsequently) who was completely tone-deaf; he didn't know anything about music. But the idea struck him as being pretty interesting, and so he said to Rosing, "All right, I'll give you so much money, and you start this American Opera Company and see what happens." Well, then Rosing arrived in Rochester, which was of course the place where the Eastman Kodak Company was generated, and Eastman owned practically half of the town. And then one fine day I received a cable from Rosing, from Rochester to Paris, asking me if I wouldn't come to be an opera coach in that opera department, promising me an extraordinary salary of \$3,000 a year.

BERTONNEAU: This was astronomical at the time.

SLONIMSKY: That was absolutely astronomical, particularly in Paris. It was pretty good in America, but in Paris it was astronomical. So I said to myself that only a person like Eastman, a legendary millionaire like Eastman, could offer such a salary.

Well, anyway, so I arrived in America. I didn't have any English at all. I didn't speak a word of English. I spoke French, German and Russian, of course, and a smattering of Spanish, but not a word of English. My education in the





English language could make an interesting story of linguistic conquest. It was very painful, but I will not dwell on that particular. . . .

BERTONNEAU: Well, can you tell us a little bit about it? I think it might be kind of interesting.

SLONIMSKY: Well, I'll tell you something that would not be scientific, but nevertheless it would be pragmatic and very important for people who learn a different language; and you, being a linguist, would perhaps understand it. Well, my problem was that I was completely unaccustomed to the values, to the vocal values of the English language. I could understand French; I mean, I could understand the vocal values of French and German and perhaps Italian and Spanish, because all those languages were basically phonetic languages. But in English I found a situation, I needn't tell you, where the appearance of the word had hardly anything to do with the way the word was sounded. Furthermore, there were new vowels and new consonants that had no parallel in any European language, particularly long and short vowels. And to me there was absolutely no difference between sleeping and slipping, or heat and hit, absolutely no difference whatsoever, because this difference doesn't exist in German, French, or Russian. You can prolong a vowel and it doesn't affect it. Furthermore, the presence of two different a sounds (like head or had) and the final d or t (like hat and had) sounded the



same to me. So a hat sounded absolutely the same as ahead. Now, when somebody said, "Go ahead," I thought that he wanted me to get a hat. [laughter] So this was quite a situation. But then, as in many cases of my life, I said to myself I just cannot surrender to this situation, I had to find out how come those sounds were so different. How come there were two types of oo sound, that food was completely different from foot. Not to mention the d sounded the same to me as t. So there was absolutely no distinction for me between food and foot. So now when I think of it, I almost find it difficult to actually distinguish between the two sounds.

Well, now I decided to learn at least the vocabulary, which was easy for me because I had a good memory, and the vocabulary of course had numerous international words. As you know, the English language is a sort of a salad language, with French mixed with Saxon German and so forth, and of course scientific words being Greek, and so many words being Latin. I remembered all the anecdotes that I heard in Paris about Englishmen and Americans coming to Paris and being unable to speak French and asking where "Champs Elizas," you know, for Champs Elysées. So it worked both ways, of course.

In Rochester, I happened to become friendly with an extraordinary group of young men of my generation, some of them younger, who were active around this Eastman School of Music and the Eastman Theatre, which produced that opera



company and which was the seat of the opera company, [where they were] aware there would be enough money to play around --produce operas and give concerts. There were two English conductors, both very famous, Albert Coates and Eugene Goossens. Incidentally, Albert Coates could speak Russian like a Russian because he was born in St. Petersburg of English parents. I began taking conducting lessons with Albert Coates (this was my first experience in conducting at all). At first I could not conduct because I didn't realize that in order to give a downbeat, I had to start with an upbeat, [laughter] because otherwise the orchestra didn't know where to begin if I would suddenly strike down without any warning, that the upbeat was really a necessary prelude to the downbeat in order to establish a proper tempo. Well, I learned, also with great difficulties, strangely enough. I mean, afterwards, when I conducted famous orchestras, I never even thought of the technical problems in conducting. It was almost as difficult for me to remember how I started conducting as it is to remember how I had my first struggles with the English language.

Well, as I said, I had an extraordinary group of people there, very talented people, among them a stage director whose name was Rouben Mamoulian, who became very famous subsequently as a movie director; and a young writer, poet, painter, and singer whose name was Paul Horgan. He was quite a remarkable



fellow, had tremendous talent in many different fields, and therefore he felt that he would never be successful in any field whatsoever. Well, anyway, since I started this way, you know that there would be a happy ending at least for some of us. Well, we started a group which we called the Society of Unrecognized Geniuses. I was the president, Paul Horgan was secretary, and Rouben Mamoulian was vice-president. Now, I needn't tell you that Rouben Mamoulian became very celebrated, and I don't know whether you know about the literary successes of Paul Horgan, who is a Pulitzer Prize winner now, and so forth. But at that time he was twenty years old.

In his memoirs he recalled an episode that I quite forgot: that I was instrumental in getting his very first short story published--but not in English, in Russian.

[laughter] [Approaches to Writing]. I thought that his short stories were extraordinary. . . .

BERTONNEAU: You must have been learning English just by speaking with these people.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, now I was learning English, of course, and all these people were teaching me. Of course, Rouben Mamoulian was himself a Russian Armenian; he spoke, of course, much better English at that time than I ever did. Rosing's English was pretty dubious, even though he was married to an English woman; it was partly British and partly just not correct.





Paul Horgan, on the other hand, took me in tow, sort of, and began teaching me the kind of English that would be suitable perhaps in the Victorian society of 1890. I remember that I started with reading the collected works of Oscar Wilde at the time when I didn't even understand English. I remember until this day that there was one expression, "Of course, he knew that. . . ." So, of course: these two words registered in my brain as being equivalent of the French words de la course ("of the course"). I couldn't understand why of course meant what it meant; and I couldn't find it in any dictionary, because I could find of, and I could find course, but the two of them made no sense whatsoever. And then I decided to read regardless. I remembered this story of the Rosetta Stone and so forth, and I decided to read through until I would understand what those curious vocables actually meant. And then, of course, I had the most dreadful difficulty with the question of the articles. The Russian language has no articles, so that's why you hear Russians on television saying things like "I went to theater, I saw movie," [laughter] dropping. . . .

BERTONNEAU: Well, Paul Horgan played a little joke on you, didn't he, when he sort of transcribed those speech patterns and gave them to a character named Nicolai Savinsky?

SLONIMSKY: Oh, yes! Where did you read that? Did I mention it? I guess I did. Well, anyway, what happened to our



Society of Unrecognized Geniuses: Rouben Mamoulian went to Hollywood and became famous as a movie director, and Paul Horgan submitted his very first novel, called The Fault of Angels, for the Harper's Prize and won first prize. And in that novel he described Rochester, which in the novel was Dorchester, but the characters were very well done. And as you said, I was there as Nicolai Savinsky, with all my vintage English of the time.

So that was very amusing, of course. He even used the word that I invented at the time. You see, not only was I determined to learn English, but I was determined to contribute to the English language, and I invented all kinds of words that either sounded as highfalutin English or as low-grade or even slang English. But I was driven more to the highfalutin English because it was polysyllabic and more impressive. And there was one word, "parcevendagious" --God only knows what it meant--but they all sort of picked it up and began using it in all kinds of contexts. And Paul Horgan uses it in that novel, The Fault of Angels, which won him the prize.

Well, by that time I left Rochester and I went to Boston to join Koussevitzky as his secretary. Well, there is a separate intervening story, and. . . .

BERTONNEAU: I wanted to ask you one question before we go on, just to sort of bring one of the things you talked about



to a conclusion. You said that you were responsible for getting Paul Horgan's first book published in Russian.

Could you tell the end of that story?

SLONIMSKY: Yes, this is what happened. And again, Paul Horgan describes it in his memoirs, and of course I completely forgot about it. But he wrote a short story and tried to send it to various magazines, and he immediately got the manuscript back. I read it, and I thought it was absolutely wonderful. I could understand his English very well because it was very literary, Latinized type of English, which is typical now of the New Yorker. The New Yorker was just starting publications, and it was this kind of English, a little bit artificial but wonderfully put together. I liked that short story very much, and I asked him if he wouldn't mind for me to give it to a friend of mine, a Russian literary critic who was a refugee in Paris [Konstantin Mochulsky], to publish it in a Russian magazine. There were numerous Russian publications in Paris because there were a million refugees in France, so the Russian language and Russian language publications were very important in Paris. In due time this story was translated and published in a magazine called The Link (in Russian, of course). And needless to say, Paul Horgan was absolutely elated. It must have made an impression on him, because he mentions the magazine and everything; he must have kept it, of course.



This was quite a cause for celebration, not that he got a single franc or a penny out of it, but still it was his first publication. He had a marvelous sense of humor, and the way he presents it in his memoirs, it's really something very interesting. And then, afterwards, he became more or less celebrated and then--anticipating the events by that time--I also began conducting seriously and had my little successes in some publications of my compositions and so forth. So I wrote him an official letter, using my literary pseudonym, Nicolai Savinsky, under which he used my character in his novel, and addressing him as John O'Shaughnessy, which was his character presented in the same novel. So I wrote a letter to John O'Shaughnessy, to the secretary of John O'Shaughnessy, notifying him that, "As president of the Society of Unrecognized Geniuses, I hereby dissolve this society, reason being, said geniuses have become recognized." [laughter] Reason enough.

BERTONNEAU: Well, I think we're going to talk about the recognition now.





TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO

MARCH 15, 1977

BERTONNEAU: I think we got you through the English language and just about through your tenure at the Eastman School of Music at Rochester. How long did you stay?

SLONIMSKY: I stayed only two years there, two and a half years. And then I had a call from Koussevitzky again, from Boston this time, asking whether I would consider coming to Boston to be his secretary and pianist. I mean, secretary because by that time my English was quite sufficient for his purposes and I was able to type for him and conduct whatever public relations there were to be conducted. Now Koussevitzky had no talent for languages whatsoever. It's one of those cases that constantly astonish me, particularly among musicians. There is a legend that a musician is usually a linguist because of his fine ear. Nothing can be more erroneous than this notion. If you take just conductors like [Arturo] Toscanini or Koussevitzky or [Wilhelm] Fürtwangler, or many others whom I knew. . . . There were so many anecdotes about Koussevitzky's English and--well, perhaps even better, the English of Erich Kleiber, the conductor who said, "The Eroica Symphony from Beethoven, she is beautiful." He could never understand that the symphony was not a she, because in French it's une symphonie and in German it's die Sinfonie--in all



languages it is she, so how come in English a symphony is him? There was something unacceptable to a mind that was schooled in another language. Although with Koussevitzky, it was quite different. His mind was not schooled in any language or in any discipline. In a way he was a genius, a genius in conducting, which did not mean that he was a genius in matters intellectual or anything--which is not even a criticism. At that time, years ago, I always thought that a genius had to possess all the qualities of a genius, meaning linguistic abilities (which I prize very highly), and let's say musical ability, all those abilities to be a Renaissance man in the full sense of the word. I've learned different since. Because I realized that great presidents were very poor linguists (it's amazing that not a single president of the United States could even get along in elementary French) and that great writers did not have to be excellent proofreaders, or spellers for that matter. Hemingway was a miserable speller, but it doesn't follow that some proofreader in a publishing house is better than Hemingway because he can spell any word in Webster's Dictionary, or the editor of the crossword puzzle section who knows all the words and all the names and so forth would be necessarily greater than a great poet who could not spell, and on and so forth. Well, that concerns Koussevitzky, and we are not talking about Koussevitzky because, after all, this is my



oral history, and I'm simply mentioning Koussevitzky as a person with whom I was associated for several years and whom I really intensely admired. And yet I was puzzled by his inability to master certain ideas even in music. And this episode with Le Sacre du Printemps proves the point, that this was so difficult for him. On the other hand, if I go back to the nineteenth century and ask myself what would Wagner, or Verdi, or even Liszt, a universal man, do with Le Sacre du Printemps, they probably wouldn't be able even to approach it. So this is my view of the matter.

But now to return to my own career at that time. I was established in Rochester first, and then was summoned by Koussevitzky to Boston, and with Koussevitzky I spent several years in Boston and then in Paris.

BERTONNEAU: You went back to Paris then?

SLONIMSKY: Yes, back to Paris in the summer when he went to Paris. Then, inevitably, we quarreled.

BERTONNEAU: And there's a rather interesting story connected with your quarreling and finally breaking with Koussevitzky.

SLONIMSKY: Well, there are all kinds of interesting stories, and yet basically they are sad, and I just wonder at this distance--goodness gracious, I can hardly identify myself with that young person who was with Koussevitzky, and I suppose was simply brash. I did not realize that Koussevitzky was too sensitive to be told certain things or even to be advised about



certain matters. He always asked me for advice, because he always advertised me to his friends in exuberant terms which embarrassed me. He would introduce me to a composer or somebody and said, "You know, Nicolas, he is a mathematician." Well, I did take some courses in mathematics in Russia, but it didn't make me a mathematician. [laughter] "He can arrange things in an extraordinary manner. He has a tremendous memory," and so forth. He advertised me as, let's say, a Russian serf owner would advertise a serf's quality--he can play on the banjo, he can barber, he can cook, and so forth--because that added to the value of the master himself. And there was this quality in Koussevitzky. But perhaps--he was genuinely friendly with me, and perhaps he really admired some of my abilities that he didn't possess. My abilities were really passive. I mean, this perfect-pitch business--so what? Or good memory, or an ability to put together several ideas or even to give advice about program making--this didn't make me out to be a person of genius, to use this much-abused word again. The word shouldn't be used at all, even about real geniuses. So, well, I don't believe it would be any interest to recount the particular circumstances that finally led to our parting. But I suppose basically it was that I was not really devoted to Koussevitzky's interests. I was trying to find some independent field for myself.

BERTONNEAU: Were you already thinking about conducting on





your own?

SLONIMSKY: No, no. Conducting was far from my forte. In fact, Koussevitzky wanted to train me to be his assistant conductor with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. And he wanted me to try to rehearse the Alpine Symphony of [Richard] Strauss. Well, I remember he conducted that time, and I remember making suggestions at that time of all kinds of things, which I could do. And then one day he said, "You know, you will come to the orchestra. I'll introduce you, and you'll just start rehearsing the Alpine Symphony." And I was really scared stiff. And the morning of that rehearsal, I said that I would like to try at least to show how I would conduct. (At that time I had taken lessons with Albert Coates in Rochester, and I could conduct short pieces, more or less.) But then perhaps he began having his doubts, too. You see, his interest was to have a conductor who would be of his own household, an assistant conductor who would also be in his employ, which would have facilitated matters, because Koussevitzky did not particularly care to have other conductors come to the Boston Symphony and have success. For instance, I remember when Eugene Goossens was invited as a guest. Now, he produced an excellent impression on the orchestra because he was a cultured man, knew all about music, of course, had no such difficulties with metrical rearrangements as Koussevitzky did (he could read scores like a book); and of course I was



very friendly with Eugene Goossens from my Rochester days. And Koussevitzky didn't care for this sort of thing. He thought--in fact, he told me that it was very unseemly that I should be constantly in the company of Eugene Goossens, who was merely a guest conductor, and [be] extolling his qualities while I was in the employ of Serge Koussevitzky. Perhaps he was right. But at that time I thought this was an infringement on my liberties to associate myself with whomever I wanted. Well, there were all kinds of similar stories. Koussevitzky simply felt that I was a loyal assistant, servant, or whatever. And I repeat that perhaps he was right. Because suppose I were a cabinet minister in his establishment and I would be constantly associating with other potential candidates for the presidency (meaning for the directorship of the Boston Symphony Orchestra) and so on. So I say possibly he was right. I will not go into the psychology of this situation. And there were things that were simply comical. But you see, Koussevitzky had no sense of humor whatsoever.

There's one episode which I will try to recount very briefly. It's almost difficult for me to remember those things because it was so long ago and at this distance it seems so perfectly ridiculous. Well, anyway, at that time, of course, I was very eager to break out and to do some playing in public, particularly accompanying, composing, and



I even began thinking of writing. Because by that time my English became quite literary in writing--still not in speaking, but in writing definitely. So, I had a few engagements, womens clubs and so forth. So in Boston, I was making a career--whatever career that was. It was so modest, it was so . . . so small, so insignificant that I could hardly imagine that I would ever be independent in any sense of the word. Well, anyway, the Boston Globe conducted a series of interviews with secretaries of famous men. And among those, the librarian of the Boston Symphony Orchestra suggested to me that I would be interviewed. He suggested this also to the man who was writing this article in the Boston Globe. Now, to me this was an extraordinary opportunity, because just seeing my name in print and pictures and all that was really a tremendous thing. [laughter] Of course, you musn't forget that I was young and silly perhaps, but you see we are all silly at some time of our lives. Well, anyway, so I gladly agreed, and the interviewer came, and he asked me all kinds of questions about Koussevitzky, whether he was a difficult boss and so forth. Needless to say, of course, I gave a glowing description of Koussevitzky's character--it was a little bit hypocritical on my part. Anyway, I described it all. And then he asked me what I would like to do. So I said I would like to give little concerts and perhaps to compose; I didn't mention conducting at all because it wasn't



on my mind. At that time I had never conducted in public, except little performances at the Eastman School of Music, which was really in a conducting class. So they asked for my picture, and I had an en face picture which I gave to the Boston Globe.

Then, the following Sunday, I rushed to the newsstand to see the Boston Globe, and when I saw it, my heart fell. Because this is what happened: they selected, for the banner headline, something that I remember until this day--or maybe I remember it simply by having told it so many times, or by having the story described in a rather irreverent biography of Koussevitzky published by Moses Smith thirty years ago [Koussevitzky]. Well, anyway, the banner headline quoted the president of the United Fruit Company saying, "My secretary knows more than I do." That was selected as the headline, the main headline in the Sunday Feature section. My picture was under it, and the picture of the secretary to the president of the United Fruit Company was on the right (because it was a profile picture), and another secretary was on the left. Well, when I saw that, I said to myself, "Well, Koussevitzky will never believe that it is just accidental." Well, how right I was.

So I came, as usual, in the morning, you know, to rehearse with him and so forth, and we had lunch. After lunch Koussevitzky asked me to come to his study, and began chewing me up. He said





that he saw that headline--I knew that he was never reading the Globe (he was always taking the Herald). Well, anyway, somebody had to translate it for him because, you see, his English was nonexistent at the time. And he said it was translated to him and how dared I say such a thing? So I began explaining to him that I never said anything of the sort, that I never quoted him saying any such thing, and that it was a quote from the president of the United Fruit Company. Of course, it didn't help the situation. He still thought that I somehow managed to manipulate through my manager. I mean he was completely ignorant about American newspapers and so forth. He thought that a person could actually tell the makeup man in the newspaper how to arrange pictures and so forth. Well, anyway, that was one of those things. We were not on speaking terms for several days.

And then there were difficulties about program making. He always asked me about programs, and very often I suggested the program. Then he began accusing me of always arranging my programs so that my friends, either performers or composers, would have a spot on the program. Which was of course not true. But as he pressed me, sometimes I would suggest a French composer or a Russian composer or an American composer who happened to be a friend of mine. And if the piece was unsuccessful, he would blame me.

Well, anyway, it was one of those stories, but basically



it was a clash of temperament. I have no temperament whatsoever, but the fact remained that I was obviously not completely dedicated to the cause of glorifying Koussevitzky, that I had other interests. Well, anyway, we parted company, which was, as I say, in a way sad. In the meantime the rumor spread actually that I was really teaching Koussevitzky how to read scores and so forth. Why? Because Koussevitzky himself praised me so much to various people that they put two and two together and said, "Well, how come that this guy has to play those scores for Koussevitzky? Then Koussevitzky probably can't read his own scores." This legend went on for years and years, and inevitably Koussevitzky was suspicious that I was somehow contributing to that legend, which of course was far from my intention. As I said, it was really very, very unfortunate. I felt offended because I was suspected in such things, you know, and I suppose he was unhappy because a person who was closest to him seemed to be veering in different directions. Well, anyway, that was the end of our association, exactly fifty years ago. In March 1927. I left him probably in April 1927, and I was on my own. So much for that.

BERTONNEAU: And that ended the association with Koussevitzky.

SLONIMSKY: Well, that was the end of that association, although later on I wrote about Koussevitzky always in glowing terms, quite sincerely so. And as I began publishing my books,



he seemed to be impressed by the quality of learning or whatever exhibited in my books, by the qualities that he himself didn't possess, and therefore they seemed very grand to him. And I know, for instance, that he actually purchased a copy of my very difficult book, Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns, which he could read because it was music, and that he spoke very favorably about this book and my other publications to various people. So professionally there was no enmity, no conflict of any sort.

Well, what next?

BERTONNEAU: I want to go back a little bit to about 1925 (you'll have to correct me because I'm sure I haven't got the date exactly right). But you began to do a little bit of composing in the 1920s. and I think some of the first things you did were the Five Advertising Songs, was that right?

SLONIMSKY: Oh, yes. [laughter]

BERTONNEAU: Could you describe how you came to write those and tell a little bit about them?

SLONIMSKY: Well, you see, of course I was composing ever since I was a child, but I didn't regard my composing as a serious matter. But in Rochester, I submitted one of my songs to Oscar Wilde words ["Silhouettes"] for a contest at the Eastman School of Music, not realizing that the contest was for students, not for members of the faculty. My song,



of course, got first prize, and then they discovered that it was written by a member of the faculty. So I apologized for having submitted it, because I simply didn't know the rules or simply was mistaken in this. But I was already beginning to compose.

Parallel to my learning the English language from Oscar Wilde and Dickens and a little Shakespeare and, anyway, very literary and very polysyllabic sources, I was fascinated by the type of American language which found its reflection in the advertising section of newspapers, but particularly the Saturday Evening Post, which I read voraciously. I thought that those advertisements were extremely revealing of the Homo Americanus, or perhaps of our society in general. I was particularly fascinated by the advertising ([which was] incidentally not so much different from advertising that goes on in TV commercials now, but this was my first acquaintance with this kind of advertising) where all you had to do was to use a certain type of toothpaste and then you had immediately acquired happiness and success in society and so forth. And then all kinds of ailments that could be remedied by pills. And such fascinating advertisements as "Children cry for Castoria." You don't see those advertisements much now; I mean, it's all covered up. But at that time, fifty years ago, it was very blatant and, as I said, very appealing. I still remember the illustrations of those advertisements.





For instance, there was an advertisement showing a bearded doctor, fully dressed--not in white but in black, you know, like nineteenth-century doctors--looking at a young woman and in fact pointing an accusing finger at her. And the caption was, "And then her doctor told her." So you expect the worst. Well, it turns out she had some problems with her "faulty elimination." This was the kind of language used then. So I set this particular advertisement to music, very emotional, inflated, dramatic harmonies and melodies ["And Then Her Doctor Told Her"]. And then of course "Children Cry for Castoria"--that was for falsetto voice. And other things. "No More Shiny Nose"--that was another thing. [laughter] And "Make This a Day of Pepsodent," and so on and so forth. There were quite a few of them. Well, needless to say, when I played and sang them with my composer's voice, they were extremely successful in my Rochester company. Everybody knew them. I think that Paul Horgan until this day can sing all those advertising songs. And he also gave me some ideas for real songs. There was one song glorifying Utica sheets and pillow cases ["Utica Sheets and Pillow Cases"], which he thought was a wonderful melody à la Schumann. So he wrote his own words, and it was published with his own words ["'Neath Stars"] without any Utica sheets and pillow cases.

Some years later, when I acquired a music publisher, I



thought of publishing those songs for amusement. The publisher thought that they were very amusing, and they were set in type. But then his lawyer suggested to him that you ought to ask the companies represented whether they were willing to have their products mentioned. And lo and behold, he got letters from the companies' lawyers absolutely forbidding he use those advertisements. Because, you see, by that time, twenty or twenty-five years, those advertisements were considered as fraudulent. You couldn't use such advertising anymore. Except the Castoria song-- the Castoria people allowed me to use their text, but none of the other companies, so the edition had to be scrapped. Now I have only one copy of those songs, and I had them recorded here, but I changed the names. So it's no longer Pepsodent or whatever, but its something else [Plurodent]. But they were never published. The songs were never published, but, as I say, they provided amusement.

And then I began to compose more and more, but this time I went into a different direction. My early songs, they were all miniatures, either songs or piano pieces or very small chamber music pieces for violin and piano, something like that, but mostly songs and piano pieces. Several celebrities sang my songs, among them Roland Hayes. So I began to feel like a composer, and that attracted me very much.



I met Henry Cowell, the American composer, about 1926. He was just starting his publication, his quarterly called New Music [Quarterly], and he asked me if I wouldn't contribute to New Music. Well, of course I was interested, and the very first publication of any music of mine was in that New Music Quarterly in 1928, now nearly fifty years ago. It was an album of pieces which I called Studies in Black and White, because the right hand played on the white keys only, and the left hand played on the black keys only. And there was a gimmick to it. Of course, you could always do that, and a number of composers did that long before me, Darius Milhaud and others, of course. I mean, there was no revelation in this particular type of technique. But I decided to make it difficult. I decided that I would not use a single dissonance despite this unusual combination. Now, I will not go into technical details but it was pretty difficult, because, you see, each note could be harmonized only by one or two notes on the white keys. Let's say C in the right hand was consonant with A-flat and E-flat among black keys, D was consonant only with B-flat and F-sharp. You couldn't use two white keys simultaneously for obvious reasons, because I decreed that the right hand should be always on the white keys and the left hand always on the black keys. Well, anyway, I succeeded in composing a suite which had certain values, as I say, as a gimmick. As a matter of fact, I'm



not at all ashamed of it. I think that it had something, and that something was this: that I wanted to prove to myself that given a certain premise, you could write music that would be logical within itself, whatever the ultimate results. The music itself may be of no value, but my point was to prove to myself that such a thing was at all possible. And this gave me an entirely new direction in composition. You see, I became tremendously interested in technical problems of this nature, which I still believe is perfectly legitimate.

Later on I developed such ideas as, for instance, composing twelve-tone music also in consonances, only in using triads, which were sort of taboo in Schoenberg's method of composition--I mean, not fully expressed, but no atonal composer or twelve-tone composer would use triads. Now, I split the twelve notes of the chromatic scale into four mutually exclusive triads [in "Old Faithful" from Yellowstone Park Suite for piano]. And I found certain things that worked amazingly well, that all of a sudden I obtained intervallic connections and transitions that I wouldn't have found if I hadn't set myself this completely unnecessary and perhaps unjustifiable restriction. But this is what I did to begin with in those Studies in Black and White; and the effect was, as I said, interesting. Some reviewer said that my idea was evangelical because my right hand knew not what my left hand





was doing.

However, this was my beginning in composition, and Henry Cowell really put me into the field of composition.

Several years later he edited the book American Composers on American Music, and I wrote an article on Henry Cowell, and Henry Cowell wrote an article about me. That was certainly a society of mutual admiration. But this definitely put me on the map as an American composer, even though I had composed very little at that time. In fact, I still have composed very little, even at this stage of the game. And perhaps it's just as well, because I know so many composers who have written completely unnecessary symphonies and oratorios and lead unhappy lives, whereas I composed mostly in miniature forms, and so whatever success I obtained as a composer--which is very, very little--but still I always felt that I got more than I deserved for the few little pieces--well, few: maybe fifty, sixty pieces--that I published. But I can say that at least I'm exceptionally lucky in seeing that practically every piece of music that I ever wrote has been published, which very few composers can claim.

BERTONNEAU: Didn't you also begin to write a ballet with a scenario by Paul Horgan?

SLONIMSKY: Yes, yes. Not only did I begin to write that ballet, I actually wrote that ballet. It was one of those



fairy-tale ballets, called Prince Goes A-Hunting or something like that, a highly inflated scenario by Paul Horgan. And it was directed by Rouben Mamoulian, so. . . .

BERTONNEAU: Was this performed?

SLONIMSKY: Yes, it was performed, of course! At the Eastman School of Music. I did not conduct it because at that time my conducting was still very rudimentary. But a chorus leader there, who I believe is still living--Gerhart was his name--he conducted it. And also I had to be helped in my orchestration, which was very uncertain. And another famous composer named Giannini helped me.

BERTONNEAU: Vittorio Giannini?

SLONIMSKY: Vittorio Giannini, who also happened to be in Rochester, helped me to orchestrate it. We spent the whole night orchestrating it together to get it ready for the performance. I still remember some little trumpet solo that I put in, that I thought was absolutely divine, you know, as a composer is apt to think. Well, so this ballet had the first and last performance--[laughter] well, there were maybe two performances, maybe three performances--at the Eastman School of Music in 1924.

Then I began to do all those things that I'm doing still now.

BERTONNEAU: This brings us up to about 1927 then. You were in Boston, you had severed your ties with the Boston Symphony



Orchestra and Koussevitzky, and you'd begun to compose a little bit, but you were basically striking around still really looking for something.

SLONIMSKY: I was just looking for something, and I didn't even know for what, because, you see, my pieces were not published until 1928, and Roland Hayes sang my songs about the same time, and then there were other singers whom I accompanied and who sang my songs. And I had a curious reputation as a person who was sort of the power behind the throne of Koussevitzky. It was a very unpleasant type of situation for me, because although it was usually complimentary to me in the belief that I really knew more about Koussevitzky, and I sort of helped him and so forth, which was simply untrue. . . . Well, of course, I knew more than Koussevitzky in various ways, but Koussevitzky was not interested in things that I knew about. And, nevertheless, it put me in a false position, as if I was advertising myself, which was just about the last thing in the world I wanted to do. Of course, I wanted some publicity, and I wanted to get ahead simply enough to be able to make a living, because at that time I had abandoned my lucrative position in Rochester and then I broke with Koussevitzky--who incidentally paid me much less than I ever got in Rochester, but still it was pretty good. I mean, strange to relate, he paid me fifty dollars a week. But this



included also meals. But fifty dollars a week--well, I don't know what it would mean, but still it wasn't a munificent sum of money to pay to a secretary who also acted as a pianist. Anyway, so that chapter of my life was finished, and. . . .

BERTONNEAU: Can I ask you one more question about something I think happened at this time? Again, correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't you say that you tried to learn how to drive about this time? Or was that later?

SLONIMSKY: Oh, much later, much later. No, I wasn't even thinking of driving or any kind of going into the field of true America. I was still very much of a European, you know, with my roots in Russia and my family still in Russia--I mean, my relatives of my generation. My mother was still living in Russia, and then eventually she came to America. But anyway, I was moving along, in what direction I didn't even know myself, but I was moving.

And it was about 1930 when I published my first article in the Boston Evening Transcript, which was a very dignified newspaper, and which, incidentally, had a music critic and drama critic who wrote in the language of Lord Chesterfield [H.T. Parker]. [laughter] I mean he really wrote eighteenth-century English. And so I read his reviews avidly--well, I read everything. In Boston I would go to Atheneum or would go to Concord (there was a wonderful little library there)





and just read and read and read, anything at all that I could read, but particularly nineteenth-century authors whose language was sort of very close to me, first of all because it was so heavily Latinized, because it was completely lacking the vulgar or inaccurate grammar syntax, or particularly word usage. I was already very sensitive to redundancies and solecisms and all of those things that now all those people deplore. [laughter] Which doesn't mean that I was not interested in slang--I was very much interested in slang. I wrote a piece ["The Haunting Horn"] which I dedicated to Henry Ford on the occasion of his manufacturing whatever-millionth of "Flivvers" he manufactured, and I dedicated it, "To a Flivver with a flapper inside of it." So I used all those words. Of course, those words are meaningless now. But, anyway, I read newspapers of the low type as well as the Boston Evening Transcript. I don't believe there is a newspaper now to equal that kind of a newspaper. It really belonged to the nineteenth century; it went out of existence about 1940.



TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

MARCH 17, 1977

BERTONNEAU: I think we finished our last conversation talking about what you were doing after you severed your ties with the Boston Symphony in 1927, and I'd like to talk this time about the foundation of the Chamber Orchestra of Boston, and about its and your association with the avant-garde of American composers who were active and desiring to promote their music at the time. So perhaps we could begin with some of your observations about the state of American music at the time, about public reaction to the avant-garde, and about some of the composers who were thought to be representative of American musical talent, but who it turned out, possibly weren't, to give that some kind of contrast with the people who it turned out were names to be remembered, [Charles] Ives, [Edgar] Varèse, Cowell, etc.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. When I came upon the musical scene of America in 1923, still in Rochester, then to me America represented a vast expanse of all kinds of music making, not necessarily the avant-garde kind of music making, except for the beginnings of jazz. And that was modern enough. I met George Gershwin, and I was fascinated by his Rhapsody in Blue, which I heard for the first time in Rochester in 1925. But still, this was not what I regarded as avant-



garde music. I was looking for some continuation of the music of Scriabin and perhaps Stravinsky, which at that time was not very strong. And then, of course, my association with Koussevitzky enabled me to become more closely acquainted with the true avant-garde of American music at that time, which was not really the avant-garde of the future. Aaron Copland was very strong with Koussevitzky. He played his famous Piano Concerto with the Boston Symphony, which aroused the indignation of the Boston Brahmins, even put Koussevitzky on the spot, because most audiences regarded this as an affront to their sensibility. They just didn't want to hear that kind of music, which was a reflection of the American scene (and particularly the American urban scene), which was not pretty, which did not appeal to them, and which was in a way irritating. Koussevitzky, however, was not to be daunted by all this outcry. He continued to support Aaron Copland and then later a number of other American composers who also expressed some kind of American notions in their music, although Aaron Copland, really as of that time--let's say 1927, 1928--represented the greatest, the most radical departure from what was understood at the time by American music lovers to be good music or, to use the term that Ives often applied derisively, "nice music."

Now in 1927, after I left Koussevitzky in the spring, I



began seriously thinking of trying to conduct. I had no experience in conducting whatsoever. I had a few lessons with Albert Coates in Rochester, but I could not come to terms with the orchestra. My conducting was an intellectual exercise in my own mind; but from my mind to my hands, to my facial expression, to the orchestra [and back] through my ears, there was still a distance to be covered. Well, in 1927, I had an idea of starting a little orchestra composed of Boston Symphony men and designed specially to perform the kind of modern music that even Koussevitzky would not touch. I came to this consideration mainly through my contact with people like Henry Cowell and my correspondence with George Antheil and other modernists. And then, of course, I knew Aaron Copland very well through my association with Koussevitzky. Aaron Copland was there all the time, and I was seeing him quite a lot. All this was very exciting to me and, as I mentioned before, I was already experimenting with some possibilities of creating a kind of new music that would not necessarily sever all links with old music but at the same time would have an entirely new technique of composition. I composed my set of Studies in Black and White, which of course was a sort of an experimental and perhaps abstract kind of music which did not appeal to senses or to sensitivities but more to the intellect. Nevertheless, I hoped to produce an impression





of emotional response by such ways.

Well, I met Henry Cowell in the summer of 1927, and we discussed the possibilities of conducting modern works. I went right ahead and organized my Chamber Orchestra of Boston. I had some financial backing, and I had a manager [A.H. Handley] who was willing to undertake the risk of giving those concerts. I performed my first concerts of modern American music--not necessarily American music only; there were also pieces by European composers--that was on Christmas Eve, 1927. I very boldly appeared on the stage in a small hall and had those very fine and experienced Boston musicians with me. Of course, I rehearsed with them first. I had a world premiere by a local Boston composer who wrote a special piece for me; his name was Heinrich Gebhard [Divertimento for Piano and Orchestra]. He hardly made any ripple at all in modern music. He was a German-American, a very fine musician, and he was himself the soloist in this piece for piano and orchestra. I must say that I did not feel quite at home conducting all those pieces, but I was insistent, at least, in my ideas. My problem was the technical correspondence between my beat and the orchestra and the ear. Well, I had a lot of publicity, even in advance of this concert, and then the great moment came. I was dressed in my monkey suit, as it was called--meaning tuxedo, not full dress--and I managed to



go through the program. Everything was all right. I played a piece by Henry Cowell, a little symphonietta [Symphonietta]; it was a world premiere. And there were other pieces. It was a miscellaneous program, including some pieces that were not modern at all. Modernism per se was not a required ingredient in it.

Well, I got mixed reviews, but my greatest supporter, H.T. Parker, in the Boston Evening Transcript, declared that I was simply not prepared to conduct, that this is a conductor obviously at his beginnings. He said that the program was the sort of thing that some kind of league of composers--he used this term in a derogatory way--could have produced; and he said the pieces themselves were not interesting, and perhaps this new piece by Gebhard, played by him, saved the situation. Anyway, it was a very bad review indeed; I was sort of upset because he was at first my supporter. He always praised me when I played the accompaniments to singers. In fact, I remember when I accompanied a local singer in the song recital, it was H.D. Parker who said that the singer was musical and fine; however, the attention of the audience was riveted not to her but to the accompanist, Nicolas Slonimsky, as he put it, "of Mr. Koussevitzky's household," just as if I was some kind of a servant in his household. [laughter] And he praised my accompaniments and the poetry of my playing and everything.



It was an extraordinary review. And then he damned my conducting.

Well, you see, I was not to be deterred by the thing. I was pretty stubborn. Not that I believed that really I could conduct, but what I wanted was to conduct the kind of programs that other orchestras didn't conduct. And since I managed to go through the program without any major disaster, then it was all right. And then my various friends that could conduct told me that my problem was that I was too self-conscious in beating time, that it wasn't necessary, that I should address myself to the orchestra in a freer fashion. It was very well to listen to such advice, but I simply didn't know how to do it.

Then I got an engagement to conduct the Harvard University Orchestra, and that was for me an occasion to learn conducting by the direct contact with players. There was also another advantage: with Boston Symphony players, it really didn't matter what I did, because they played. They could play without me; they could play without anybody. It was a small orchestra, and inasmuch as I didn't make mistakes--I conducted the proper meters more or less in correct tempo--there was no trouble. But here I was confronted with a group of youngsters at Harvard, and I really had to conduct; I really had to direct them. And that was a salutary



experience for me. To me it was an event every time even I conducted a rehearsal. See, I was just beginning to enter this terrible malaise, the terrible disease, the obsession that is conductoritis--I mean when a person wants to conduct, to direct players and to feel that players follow your will and your musical imagination and so forth. It was a vanity thing also. But above all I wanted to experiment with the possibilities of conducting new works, or old works in a new way. There, of course, I conducted Mozart and Beethoven and Schubert, and some early American music, perfectly innocuous pieces of all descriptions, some Russian overture or something like that.

So I began to feel this contact with the orchestra. I also learned how to listen to the orchestra without being too much preoccupied with my own beat. Also I had to develop a sense of swimming with the orchestra and meeting all kinds of emergencies. For instance, when it turned out that the cellist who was supposed to play, in the Unfinished Symphony, the famous second theme, that he simply couldn't play it. He was spoiling the playing of the second and the third cellists--I think I had about four cellists--so I simply had to tell him not to play but just move his bow above the strings because he was very eager to be in the orchestra. A very nice, very intelligent person, but he just couldn't play the cello. Then there was an episode during a rehearsal





of the Egmont Overture by Beethoven, when the viola player-- we had only one viola player (viola players were very hard to get)--suddenly arose and said he was not going to play. Well, I asked him what happened. And he said, "Well, I'm not going to play the same note 100 times" (because of course the viola is usually in the middle register in classical works). So I said, "Well, what can I do? Beethoven didn't provide a part for you." And I persuaded him to stay. This saved the situation. For professional concerts-- and I did conduct professional concerts in the suburbs of Boston--very often I had to ask a couple of Boston Symphony players to help out, particularly a violinist and a cellist, because those Harvard men really couldn't play very well. So I managed. And then gradually I established this contact with the orchestra.

Also at that time I still had a characteristic that I eventually overcame, which I had since my childhood, to be a show-off, to do something that others couldn't do, or simply to astonish people by tricks and gimmicks and all kinds of things. Now, for instance, I remember very well when I conducted the Unfinished Symphony, in rehearsal I memorized the letters, the rehearsal letters. So I would stop the rehearsal and tell the orchestra to go on from the seventh bar after letter so-and-so . . . and that was to me a source of self-aggrandizement and amusement.



Anyway, I managed to bring the orchestra to a certain level of professionalism, mainly because I spent a lot of time in tuning the orchestra. And there my perfect pitch helped me. I would just start to exercise in tuning, and so at least when you heard a note or some violins playing in unison, at least it was in unison and not some kind of a blur. In fact, Walter Spadling, a professor at Harvard University, published a book in 1930 [Music at Harvard]--that was a little after I had already left the Harvard University Orchestra (or they left me)--and said that I established for the first time in the history of that orchestra a sort of a professional level of performance, mainly by securing a correct pitch, correct tempo, and maintaining rhythm, and presenting a professional (or perhaps nearly professional) type of performance. So that was quite an impression. I remember Walter Piston came to one of my concerts and asked me how I managed to make an orchestra out of that group.

So then, see, gradually, even without thinking that--perhaps my conducting ability became a reality when I stopped projecting myself on the orchestra and stopped thinking of my beat but began using my hands, and occasionally my facial expression, to obtain certain results, not to project my own interpretation, and particularly not to be conscious of my movements. And then the thing began rolling.



When I gave my second concert with the Boston chamber orchestra--or really the Chamber Orchestra of Boston, it was called--then I already could do much better. Then I played another Cowell piece [Suite for piano and orchestra], with Cowell himself at the piano, when he produced tone clusters and also played inside the strings of the piano in a piece called "Leprechaun," and of course the leprechauns, the little devils as represented by Cowell's picking up strings, were very effective. And then the concerts became interesting even to the general public, although I could never get enough of an audience in order to pay even the expenses.

BERTONNEAU: Where were you giving the concerts?

SLONIMSKY: Well, I was giving those concerts in a smaller hall, Jordan Hall. [Eben Dyer] Jordan was an industrialist who had a very large department store [Jordan Marsh]; he was sort of a Macy or Gimbel of Boston. And Jordan Hall was part of the New England Conservatory of Music. It seated about 800 people, and still I was not getting my full attendance or even half attendance, so that the hall was heavily papered. But still I began having an audience of my own.

Well, in 1928 I played a piece by Henry Cowell; I also gave the first performance of a piece by Henry Gilbert, a forgotten American composer, who nevertheless was one of the



pioneers of American music. He wrote a little Suite for Chamber Orchestra which I performed for the first time--it was a world premiere, so that was something--also Cowell's Symphonietta. And then Cowell played at another concert; Cowell played his own suite with all those tricks. And I remember the critic of the Boston Post ran a headline that Cowell loved for years and years, "Uses Egg to Show Off Piano." Of course, Cowell didn't use any actual eggs, but he used a darning egg--that is, a wooden ball--to play on the strings of the piano. So the darning egg was mentioned in my program notes--of course, I wrote my own program notes--and this gave an opportunity to the headline man in the Boston Post to use this expression. As I said, Henry Cowell simply loved this particular headline.

Well, still, the problem was to keep the orchestra going. And in 1929 Cowell spoke to me about an unknown American composer whom he regarded very highly. His name was Charles Ives. I'd never heard that name. Of course, there were no performances of the music of Charles Ives in Boston or--well, there were a few performances in New York, and in 1928 Eugene Goossens played a movement of the Fourth Symphony, just one movement of Charles Ives. Well, anyway, he was a complete mystery to me. Well, when I was in New York, Henry Cowell arranged for me to come to lunch with him to the house which Charles Ives owned in New York City on Sixty-seventh





Street, East Sixty-seventh Street, and I met Ives. I was very much impressed by his appearance. He was a very thin person, you know, almost fragile, but a tall man. And he seemed to me the very personification of a transcendentalist out of the time of Emerson and Thoreau and Hawthorne, and all those people whom Ives himself admired so much, and whose works I was beginning to appreciate myself and began reading rather avidly. And then Ives showed me one of his scores; it was Three Places in New England. And I had a very strange sensation, which I believe I was--the actual sensation I had was not something superinduced by memory after many years; I just somehow realized that it was a work of genius. And I used the word genius in my program notes, much to the irritation of some of my friends. I just realized it was something so strong, so extraordinary, that I just had to play it. But it was arranged for a rather large orchestra; there were several trumpets, three trombones, and so forth. I could not manage it, because I had a chamber orchestra. My idea was to create a repertory of pieces that would have only one flute (interchangeable with the piccolo), one oboe (interchangeable with the English horn), one clarinet (no bass clarinet), one bassoon (no double bassoon), one trumpet, one horn, one trombone, no tuba, percussion, strings and piano--in other words, one of each. I don't know why the idea fascinated me, not to have duplications, because although



I admired classical music, naturally, it always seemed to me that running in thirds or in sixths or in octaves all the time somehow reduced music to a repetitive process; and I felt that if there were one instrument of each, then an orchestra could become a soloist itself.

BERTONNEAU: This was in itself in a way a revolutionary idea, wasn't it? Because the romantic industrial orchestra was at its heyday.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. Well, I wouldn't say that it's a revolutionary idea. See, with me every idea was generated by a desire to oppose the trend, the current tradition. There may have been an element of stubbornness in it, the kind of stubbornness that my manager particularly deplored. He used the expression, "You are shooing the money away." Because I was doing things that were different, as the commercial word has it. And I don't suppose that I did it on purpose, or that I did all those things in order to épater les bourgeois or infuriate people or just out of some kind of a mischievous spirit. I don't believe so. I think that I really was searching for something. And at that time I really was not even a professional. Even then, still, I doubt whether I was a professional conductor in any sense of the word, because I doubt whether I could have taken a real orchestra and just gone through a season without a major disaster. But I already was beginning to develop a special



approach to that particular kind of music.

I was fascinated by this Ives piece, and I asked him if he couldn't possibly arrange it for my chamber orchestra, that is, reduce the number of instruments. And he said that it's entirely possible to arrange it with single instruments and then to give whatever was missing to the piano. (And of course I always counted on the piano part.) He said that he would prepare it for me for my next concert. And sure enough, in a few months I received a score from him, which I believe was the last score that he ever wrote out in his own hand, because of course he suffered from diabetes and a heart condition, and his handwriting became extremely unsteady. But he did arrange the score of Three Places in New England for my chamber orchestra. In fact, this is the only version that is now in use. Well, the complete score has been finally put together and was performed for the first time a couple of years ago at Yale University. But up to that point, this most famous work of Ives was performed in a form that he arranged for my Chamber Orchestra of Boston, a sort of historical footnote that is quite extraordinary.

Well, I don't know whether I should go into details. I think it's worth it. So let me concentrate on that particular work which I conducted in New York in January 1931. So I'm already skipping three and a half years of my Chamber Orchestra of Boston, which I conducted here and there, not



too successfully. We had very few engagements, relatively speaking. Of course, I didn't conduct only modern music. I conducted any kind of music depending on the needs of the audience. And I believed that the farthest point that I ever conducted with this group was Worcester, Massachusetts. I never ventured beyond those limits. Well, maybe I had a couple of concerts in Maine. Anyway, financially, it was very difficult to arrange. But by that time, 1929, 1928, when I conducted the Cowell pieces, 1929 and 1930, where I continued to fill whatever dates I could get with my Chamber Orchestra of Boston. . . .

And then there was this opportunity to play a piece by Ives. Rather than play it first in Boston, I played it in New York. I was able to engage the Chamber Orchestra of Boston while the Boston Symphony under Koussevitzky was playing in New York, so I didn't have to pay transportation from Boston to New York, which would have been out of the question. I had three rehearsals. The most important piece was, of course, Three Places in New England. Then I had a piece by Carl Ruggles, Men and Mountains, and a few other pieces of lesser importance.

Now, what happened afterwards was highly significant, but first I must really cite the affair of Three Places in New England. The next problem was to get the work published. Now, Charles Ives had published before that his





collection of songs, 114 songs, in 1920 at his own expense, of course--and his Concord Sonata, also at his own expense, with the typical announcement in the score, "Anyone who wished to have a copy may write to the composer and a copy will be sent gratis." No price was indicated. Well, there was no use trying to get a commercial publisher to accept the score of Three Places in New England for publication because nobody knew Charles Ives, and it was obviously not a commercial proposition. But in Boston I was friendly with a publisher, C.C. Birchard, whom I knew personally, and I went to see him. And I put the proposition to him. I said that the work is undoubtedly a very significant American work, and--which was very important, of course--that Ives would assume all the costs of publication. C.C. Birchard before that published a series of works by Eastman School composers, works by [Howard] Hanson and Arthur Shepherd and some others. But of course those works were published on the basis of a grant; there was a certain grant given for a publication. With Ives, the costs were provided by Ives himself. He was able to do so because he was an insurance man, as now everybody knows (I mean everybody concerned with the cause of American music). So he had by that time retired. By 1930 he retired from everything because he could no longer write music in longhand and he could no longer conduct his business. So he was a retired man at--he wasn't sixty years old yet; he



was in his fifties. So I had conducted all the negotiations, and if I remember correctly, they charged only \$750 for publication of a full score of about fifty-six pages. Of course, now it would have cost a fortune. It was all engraved. I read the proofs, and I sent the proofs to Ives, and we worked on the proofs together. And at that time I could appreciate the extreme precision of the mind of Charles Ives. You know, the score looked to a person who was not accustomed to this kind of music as a description of chaos, because of the dissonances thrown together and extremely difficult writing for the orchestra part, particularly for the wind instruments. And all this had to be arranged in a certain order.

Now, there was a problem. The second movement contained the description of a meeting of two village bands, both playing the same march--or anyway similar march tunes--but at completely different meters, so that three bars of one march equaled four bars of the other march. Now, Ives wrote it out in adjusting the bars so that the downbeat in one group of instruments coincided with the upbeat of another group, and then there was a sort of a syncopation going through the entire section of the marches. Well, I thought that perhaps it would be more logical to rescore it so as to actually have two different sets of bar lines, actually have one part, the percussion and the piano, with the piano and



other instruments that coincided with this particular march time, to bar them separately so that there would be a multimetrical combination. Well, Ives was not so sure that it was a good idea. But then I found the most extraordinary types of coincidence of main beats, particularly in the piano part plus percussion, with the downbeats of other instruments, every three bars of one group and every four bars of the other, so that it could be done in a logical way. Well, Ives proposed then that we should have a part called, usually in Italian, ossia ("or else"), and those parts should be barred separately, but also the main beat provided for all parts if necessary. Well, I went along with that, and the section was rescored; in fact, I rescored it. By saying "rescored," I don't mean to say that I changed anything in the actual aural impression of the music, or God forbid any kind of rhythmic alterations. The result was the same. The question was only about the bar lines. It was similar to the kind of job I did for Koussevitzky in Le Sacre du Printemps, merely changing the meters without affecting the rhythm. Now, I must say that I was always convinced that there was no way of telling the difference between, let's say, 6/8 and 3/4 if 3/4 had a syncopated accent between the second and the third beat. It would produce the same impression, and I was concerned with the impression upon the ear and the



preservation of the rhythm. Well, anyway, this was the way the score was finally published, which was also extraordinary because, after all, Ives had a very independent mind that usually he didn't care to have changes introduced into his score.

Then, of course, the next problem was: if so, why should it be conducted with a single main beat? And then I asked myself this question: how about conducting both marches simultaneously, but beating one meter with my right hand and the other meter with my left hand?

BERTONNEAU: This is the famous evangelical. . . .

SLONIMSKY: Yes, evangelical conducting, you know, right hand knowing not what my left hand was doing. As a matter of fact, I did not do it at my first performance, but I eventually developed this method of conducting. And I proposed to Ives that in the published score there should be a special note to the conductor saying that if the conductor so desires, the right hand should conduct the faster march, or vice versa. Actually, it was vice versa; the left hand I proposed, I conducted, so it conducted alla breve four bars of 2/2 against three bars of 4/4, so. . . .





TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO

MARCH 17, 1977

BERTONNEAU: We're talking about the note to conductors on the score of the Three Places in New England by Ives.

SLONIMSKY: The note to conductors I proposed to Ives indicated, with a diagram of course, how to combine those two different meters. That is really not so terribly difficult: the downbeat of the left hand on the second bar would coincide with the fourth beat of the first bar in the right hand; then the next downbeat in the left hand would coincide with the third beat of the third bar of the right hand, and then the downbeat of the left hand would coincide with the fourth beat of the right hand, so that there would be four downbeats in the left hand against only three downbeats in the right hand. Well, frankly, I was not sure that I could conduct this way; I mean, it was just purely a theoretical idea. But I was confronted with this situation at a concert where I had to conduct an oral piece by Wallingford Riegger, a group of canons [Three Canons] which were written in 5/8 (at least my score called for 5/8). I conducted 5/8, but there was a group of instruments that had 2/8 in the score. Then I conducted 2/8, but the other group had 5/8. Now, rehearsal time is the most frightening type of time-consuming action short of military action, because every minute costs time; even if you could afford to stop and begin figuring out



what to do, there would be a sense of demoralization in the orchestra which is extremely bad. Well, anyway, so on the spur of the moment I decided that the only solution was for me to conduct 2/8 with my left hand and 5/8 with my right hand, seeing that the duration of each eighth note was a constant. So it wasn't like a quintuplet or something like that. It wasn't six five notes against two; it was five bars of 2/8 equaling two bars of 5/8. As simple as that, two by five, five by two. And so I said to the orchestra--and at that time, see, there was this salutary situation where I didn't think what it might be; I just began beating it. And lo and behold it worked, and it presented no difficulty whatsoever.

Well, anyway, so I suggested this type of conducting in the note to conductors, but Ives objected. Ives wrote me--he was in New York; I was in Boston--he wrote me and said that this conductors' note would not serve any purpose. As he said in his very typical way, he said, "A conductor like yourself would not need this indication. A conductor like Toscanini or somebody else who does not possess your high genius of conducting" [laughter] "would be unable to do it no matter how many times he tried. And the conductor like Eugene Goossens, who certainly could do it, would regard it as offensive just to be told that this was the way to do it, because he certainly could have done it



himself." Now, it's very interesting that Eugene Goossens was the only one in Ives's estimation who could compare with me. Of course, Eugene Goossens was the one that conducted that extremely difficult second movement of Ives's Fourth Symphony.

There's an interesting parallel in this estimate of Koussevitzky and conductors like Toscanini and others, not because--Toscanini, of course, couldn't possibly, even if he wanted to, he couldn't possibly conduct an Ives score, because to him that would have been chaos. And so it was with Koussevitzky and practically everybody--except possibly with [Leopold] Stokowski, but that came later, when Stokowski finally realized that Ives was a composer who wrote music that could be conducted. Well, the parallel is between this appreciation and Schoenberg's opinion about conductors, [laughter] and this is really very amusing. There is a letter from Schoenberg to a friend of his in Vienna, which I read, but which is simply unpublishable. I don't believe it has been published in its entirety even now by the Schoenberg society, even now when everyone who is involved is dead. But Schoenberg described conductors in this letter to a friend in Vienna, about 1936. He said that Toscanini and Koussevitzky and Furtwängler, Klemperer and Bruno Walter, [Wilhelm] Mengelberg--they were not conductors, they didn't know what to do. [laughter] The only true conductors who could conduct Schoenberg's work, who were equipped for



it, were Eugene Goossens and Nicolas Slonimsky. Of course, unfortunately, even I cannot publish this--I mean, I can say it--even though it's forty years in the past, a distance which is tremendous. At that time, perhaps, it was true that Goossens, even before Stokowski, Goossens could take a chance. And of course I could take a chance because I had nothing to lose. Goossens had his reputation as a conductor and [had] an orchestra. But I had no orchestra and my reputation was at that time getting blacker and blacker as the years went by--I mean, as far as the commercial application of my abilities were concerned. Now obviously I could not expect to be engaged to conduct a regular orchestra because my reputation was of a conductor who performed crazy music.

Well, anyway, so Charles Ives objected definitely, which was very unusual, because he was the mildest man ever. He never criticized anybody; he always found some extenuating circumstance. Particularly he was partial to friends like Carl Ruggles, Henry Cowell, and, among people who conducted his music, myself. See, so no matter what I did was right in the estimation of Charles Ives. He used exorbitant language in describing my type of conducting, and actually used the word genius about me. [laughter] I could use this word about Ives, but Ives was--in a way he was actually unfair. He discriminated against a certain type of conductors,





not because they [didn't] play his music, because this was not important. [It was rather that] I had a certain set of musical beliefs that coincided with those of Ives, and the same for Henry Cowell. You know, he believed that Henry Cowell was a man who had the right ideas, and Carl Ruggles, and some others like John Becker, a very little known composer who is now just emerging into some kind of very reduced limelight. Well, this was very typical of Ives. In one of his letters he wrote something to me that I--well, I must say that makes me uncomfortable just to think that he could have written such a thing. He wrote me and said, "You ferreted out a nonentity"--a fantastic phrase, but he was completely sincere in it. He really believed that I had courage, and perhaps--well, I did have the courage, but I had the courage of a person who had nothing to lose. I don't know how I would have acted if I had been conducting a real orchestra, and if the manager had told me that either I conduct this kind of music and lose the orchestra or [else] conduct decent music. Well, anyway, I don't know how I would have behaved under certain circumstances, whether I would have done the right thing, meaning refuse to compromise, or the wrong thing. But Henry Cowell in his book on Ives actually said that I was the true martyr of the cause. And of course I was, in a way, a martyr of the cause subsequently; that's. . . .

Well, after this concert in January in 1931 in New



York. . . . Incidentally, this is one of the very few concerts that Ives attended at which his music was performed. In fact, I think that this was the only one. There is such controversy existed on this subject. [laughter] But I know that he did not come to a performance of the Three Places in New England which was conducted by the associate conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Richard Burgin, many years later. In fact, I persuaded Burgin to conduct his work. Mrs. Ives came to the concert, and Ives, who was still living then, in 1947, did not. So he avoided it. After the performance I wanted to summon him, at least make him rise. And, of course, he absolutely didn't respond; he just remained seated.

There are already legends about those things. In my search for facts in my lexicographical research, I constantly find nonfacts, or perhaps maybe-facts (that is, something that may have happened and may not have happened, and there is no way of finding out whether something did happen and something did not happen). For instance, did it actually happen that Beethoven kissed Liszt? [phone rings; tape recorder turned off]

BERTONNEAU: There was a slight interruption there. I think you were about to tell the story about the legend that had sprung up about that first concert.

SLONIMSKY: That first concert. The legend was that there was some booing after the performance of the Ruggles piece



and that Ives stood up and said, "You Goddamn sissies. Can't you understand this piece of virile, masculine music?" Cowell has it, and many others repeated it. Now, I challenge it. I just--first of all, Ives never would do anything like that in public. He was such a private person that its inconceivable to imagine that he would have done anything like that. Well, those who believe that it actually happened, or those who saw or spoke to somebody who was right there and heard Ives, claim that it actually happened. I simply don't believe it. It would be completely out of character, and it is difficult to imagine that he would have done that, either about his own piece or about anything else. Of course, in private, yes. And besides, he never used such expressions as Goddamn. Even in his letters he would say, G-dot-dot-d-dot-dot-dot sissies" and so forth. He never swore. He used sharp expressions, but he never used profanity, even the mildest kind of profanity. So, as I say, here is a legend, and already we cannot figure it out.

I mentioned before that there is a question as to whether Beethoven actually kissed ten-year-old Liszt on the brow when Liszt played in Vienna. Now, this is extremely doubtful. First of all, it appears from the evidence of the Konversationhefte of Beethoven that he was reluctant to receive Liszt, and particularly Liszt's father, who was promoting this Wunderkind, and apparently he never went to



that concert. Nevertheless, there is a wonderful lithograph showing Beethoven rising at the concert and kissing Liszt. And Liszt himself always referred to this episode that he was kissed by Beethoven.

BERTONNEAU: That was just publicity-seeking propaganda?

SLONIMSKY: No, it's not publicity. No, this was not propaganda, because, after all, normally we cannot remember what happens to us in childhood. As I say, already telling the story of Charles Ives, I already feel that there is such an encrustation of legend and history upon it that I find it difficult to restore my attitude towards Ives, whom I regarded very highly, of course. I was convinced that he was a great composer, but the world was not convinced of it; and when I was with Ives, I was not cognizant of the fact that this was Charles Ives. Now, of course, any one of those who know Ives now would think that I had a fantastic opportunity just to be in his presence. But if you read Beethoven's biography, you'll realize that his friends thought also, "Well, this was Beethoven"--they admired him but they were not overawed. This kind of sentiment didn't exist. [Carl] Czerny was very much devoted to Beethoven, but when Beethoven implied that he would like very much to lodge with Czerny and Czerny's parents, because he lived alone all the time, Czerny said, well, his parents were getting old and it would be inconvenient to have a lodger. [laughter] So you must ask yourself, well, here's





Beethoven coming to you and sort of hinting that it would be so nice if you could give him a room in your house. Of course, the impression is tremendous. And it almost reaches the same kind of point with Charles Ives. Charles Ives does something or offers something. Now, who, among musicians, who would not grasp this opportunity at once? But it was not so forty or forty-five years ago (in fact, well, I met him now nearly fifty years ago, 1929).

BERTONNEAU: Did you have a similar impression about some of the other composers with whom you were associated at the time?

SLONIMSKY: Well, strangely enough, I did not. Perhaps Schoenberg was the only one. I did not have this impression about Stravinsky. Now, this was a most extraordinary attitude on my part because I was a youngster, and Stravinsky was an acknowledged great man. And he was right there. In Biarritz, we actually played poker--Koussevitzky, Stravinsky, and myself together--and again, as I say, I was not aware of the grandeur of this confrontation. I played the cimbalom part in Stravinsky's suite Ragtime in Paris, now fifty, fifty-one years ago, and Koussevitzky turned the pages for me while I was on the piano. What wouldn't I give for a snapshot of that occurrence? But you see, at the time it doesn't loom that way. So this is why it is so difficult to restore historical occurrences in full fidelity.

Another episode out of Ives's life which is already the



subject of controversy--of course, whether it's important or not, that's something else again--but Ives did not own a radio set, never read newspapers. His wife subscribed to the London Spectator, which arrived two weeks late (of course, no air transportation in those times). And he really lived far from the madding crowd, to quote Thomas Hardy. He was not even interested in having the means of communication. He didn't even own a phonograph. Now, when his piece (the Second Symphony, I believe) was played by Leonard Bernstein, when he was still alive, in 1951, the story goes--either then, or for another work in 1947--the story goes that he listened to that performance on his housekeeper's radio in the kitchen. But another version has it that he went to his neighbor's place and listened at his neighbor's. Now, is it important? No, it isn't exactly important. But see, one can say, well, if he listened on the radio in his housekeeper's place, then he didn't have to go out of the house. Had he gone out of his house and gone to the neighbor's to hear it on his neighbor's radio, that presupposes a certain interest and eagerness to hear it. Well, anyway, this is the sort of thing.

BERTONNEAU: Well, how about back to your conducting career? After that historical concert in New York, it was decided somehow that you would go to Europe with this piece. How did that come about?

SLONIMSKY: Well, this was again the idea of Charles Ives.



I spoke to him at our meeting. It was immediately after this January concert, and Cowell was there, I believe--just Cowell, Ives, Mrs. Ives, and myself. I said that it would be wonderful if such a concert could be given in Paris and perhaps in Berlin and other places because it wouldn't be so expensive, and the attitude towards American music in Europe was different from the attitude that prevailed in New York--meaning that Europeans might be interested in it as a novelty, while people in New York just thought it was another one of those concerts of unpleasant music and paid very little attention to it. New York (or for that matter Boston) was already overloaded with American music, but the kind of American music that was acceptable, even to the advanced groups of listeners, Copland and, of course, Walter Piston, and others. And I remember that Ives said, "Well, I think we can rig it up." He used this expression. And then we talked about it some more, and Ives said that he would finance this expedition, which of course was the only way for me to go there. Now, he had a way of saying those things as if it wasn't his idea, but as if it was only the proper thing to do. For instance, when I read the proofs of his work Three Places in New England for C.C. Birchard--now, I conducted all correspondences and I actually forwarded the checks. He didn't send a check to Birchard. He sent his check to pay for the printing of this work in Birchard's



name, but I was the intermediary all the time because Ives didn't want to be so obvious and so open. But then he sent me a check for \$100 for my own work, and he said, "Mrs. Ives thinks that it's unfair that you do so much for us without compensation." It was always Mrs. Ives who thought of it. Of course, it wasn't so: it was always Ives himself who thought it. He wanted to put the blame for this generous and unselfish act on Mrs. Ives.

Then we began discussing it quite seriously. Of course, I was familiar with the situation in Paris. I even knew the managers who could organize it. So I wrote a few letters, and I realized that an orchestra could be obtained in Paris and that I could be engaged to conduct a concert of American music. Well, this engagement, of course, was a piece of, well, manipulation. You see, I was to conduct an orchestra which was called Orchestra Straram because [Walther] Straram was a conductor who had some financial support from, I think, his wife, who was a rich woman, and he had concerts almost like Koussevitzky's concerts, a series of concerts in Paris giving sometimes even modern programs, mostly of French music. Well, I wrote to the manager there. I even remember this name--this was a firm: there were two names, Kiesgen and Délaet. And I asked them whether such a thing was possible, what the conditions would be, and so forth. Well, I received a courteous reply that it was entirely possible to





hire this orchestra, and it would cost so much. The franc was then rather low; I think the exchange was as high as fourteen francs for a dollar, as against the present rate of only four francs for a dollar. It was much easier to hire an orchestra in Paris than in New York--much cheaper, of course. Well, anyway, so negotiations were made, and I decided that the best day would be late in the spring, after all other concerts were over, in June. May was usually the end of the season in France, and there was still a little prorogation to fill in the few days in June.

So I went to Paris, and I met my managers. Before I left--of course, I have to remind you that there were no planes. [laughter] Lindbergh had just flown the ocean four years before I went to Paris. So that was 1931. And Ives gave me a check for \$4,000 on his bank, Chase Bank of New York City. Now, \$4,000 of course in those times, forty-five years ago, would probably be equivalent to \$25,000 or \$30,000 now. The expenses were, relatively speaking, very low. I had to take all my parts with me, of course, and I arranged two programs, one with a large orchestra and one with a small orchestra. The dates were June sixth and June eleventh. Well, on the first program I played Three Places in New England, Carl Ruggles's Men and Mountains, Varèse's Integrales and a piece of Adolph Weiss (who is now completely forgotten, but he was a very fine musician; he died ten



years ago here), a piece which was called American Life. Now Adolph Weiss was a follower of Schoenberg, and it was very curious that he wrote that piece, which contained jazz elements, and at the same time it was written in, well, something like the twelve-tone system, but anyway, atonal. And there was a piece by a Cuban composer, or a Spanish composer who lived in Cuba, Pedro Sanjuán [Sones de Castilla], and a piece by Wallingford Riegger [Three Canons], and a few other pieces. Of course, the pieces by Ives and Ruggles and Varèse commanded attention. Varèse was in Paris at that time, and Varèse was a terrific promoter. He really knew how to round up critics and arrange interviews for me, create a sensation.

Well, anyway, so I went to Paris, and I started those rehearsals. At first they were not very well received by musicians because they couldn't understand this music; but they were paid, and they were perfectly decent--which is not always the case with French musicians, of course. By that time, I must say, that I already acquired perhaps the most essential element in conducting as far as I was concerned, that I was not thinking of what I was doing with my hands; I was concentrated on obtaining certain results, getting certain sounds out of the orchestra. And above all I had this feeling that this just had to be put over somehow. I was really not thinking of myself, and least of all was I



thinking of my having a personal success. It was quite different. I was not thinking of my being brilliant or of my being a total failure. I was simply pushed into this job, and I did it as well as I could. After the concert I doubt whether I could have rendered any account of my own conducting, whether it was good or bad.

Well, anyway it turned out that I had a brilliant audience. Honegger, Prokofiev--all kinds of people came to that concert. All the futurist musicians were there--I mean, the former futurists, the Italians--and God only knows who else was present there. It was quite a thing. And all the critics were there, all the top critics came, and of course, Varèse, who was all over the place. And we had lunches, and we had all kinds of encounters. We were very vociferous, and we believed that this was the beginning of a new era and so forth; and for all I know it may not have been so far away from the truth because we were doing something exceptional. I say "we" because I was merely the conductor, but there was Varèse, who was the organizer; there was Ives, who financed the whole thing; and there were those critics who were extremely sympathetic. In fact, I had first pages in the special art journal Comoedia, front page, and also excellent covering in other newspapers and some magazines. I had a friend there, a brother-in-law of Scriabin, Boris Schloezer, who was very much interested and gave me a marvelous review. And most



critics felt that it was something new and it had to be supported. I remember that my manager came backstage and said about me, pointing towards me to somebody, he said, "Il a bouleversé tout Paris" ("He got all Paris excited"), which for some reason I remember exactly what he said. Well, anyway, so it turned out that there was some kind of a ripple about this concert.

And then there was the second concert, with fewer musicians. There were also Cuban pieces by [Alejandro] Carturla [Bembé] and a piece by Carlos Chávez, which was also new, called Energía for a small ensemble. But the names were completely unknown.

Now, I did some type of public relations and promotion or whatever, which aroused certain irritation among music critics. I appended to every title my own definition of what it was. For instance, I said about Ives--of course, I wrote in French--I said about Ives, "Une révélation transcendente par un Yankee d'un génie pure et dense." So it was "a revelation of a transcendental spirit of a Yankee of a peculiar genius," and so forth. Now, I had similar expressions about others. I said about Henry Cowell that he was "the Pico della Mirandola of modern times." Of course, Pico della Mirandola was the famous Renaissance man who did everything. But Cowell was so perplexed by it; he had no idea who Pico della Mirandola was, and other things. I also wrote program





notes in which perhaps I adopted a tone which I shouldn't have adopted, as if I was telling the critics what they were supposed to think. Well, anyway, Florent Schmitt--well, that was another concert--well, anyway, Florent Schmitt was annoyed by this. Florent Schmitt by that time was the critic of Le Temps, and he thought that I had no business telling a critic what they should think of these works. In fact, he suspected at first that the composers themselves wrote those subtitles. So I had to explain in a letter to the editor of Le Temps that I was to blame for it. Well, see, I'm telescoping all those events because there were different concerts and I don't want to describe each concert separately. In fact, all the reviews were published in a magazine called Aeolus, published in New York, the issue of 1932.

BERTONNEAU: I would like to ask you about the story that has been told about the concert you gave in Berlin. I think Klemperer had attended this concert that you gave in which you played the Ives pieces. After the concert, he was very much intrigued and wanted to get in touch with you. He went to the American Embassy, and found that they didn't know anything about you, and was told that they had received instructions to boycott this concert.

SLONIMSKY: Yes.

BERTONNEAU: Now, why, for heaven's sake?



SLONIMSKY: Well, this was a total revelation to me. This was published in a very remarkable book on Ives by a man named David Wooldridge [From the Steeples to the Mountains: A Study of Charles Ives]. I was so amazed by this story that I asked Wooldridge where he could have possibly gotten it. Of course, I have no idea. I mean, that was just 1974. The book was published in 1974. [laughter] That was three years ago, and I learned about this for the first time. And he said that it was Klemperer himself who told him that. See, Klemperer didn't die until later, and David Wooldridge knew Klemperer personally. And that book on Ives, of course, is a very controversial book. I must say that I discovered in it things that I never knew about my own concerts. (Incidentally, he also claimed that Ives listened to that Bernstein performance on his neighbor's radio, rather than on his housekeeper's radio.) Well, anyway, I think that the book was absolutely remarkable in view of all those revelations.

Well, the Paris reviewers were very much interested, and I got quite a few encomiums for my ability to conduct this music at all. Because, you see, to the critics at that time, it was remarkable that I could manage to beat all those different rhythms and to manage it, which was in a way more complex than Le Sacre du Printemps, because Le Sacre du Printemps, with all its difficulties, at least had a definite beat--there was no confusion and no chaos as there was, according to those



critics, in the works of Ives.

And then in July 1931, Philip Hale, the dean of American music critics--really the dean, because he was the oldest and the most erudite and the most felicitous in his literary style--published an editorial in the Boston Herald entitled "Mr. Slonimsky in Paris." [laughter] I think that this editorial became famous because it was reproduced so many times now in the literature on Ives. Undoubtedly you've read it. I believe that the first sentence went like this: "Mr. Nicolas Slonimsky, indefatigable in promoting the cause of extreme radicals of American music, has presented a concert in Paris in which he played works of American composers"--never named; he never named these American composers--"who are usually regarded as wild-eyed anarchists and whose works are not performed by the major orchestras in the United States." So he went on, and the point of the article was that I misrepresented American music. He said, "It is not to be wondered at that the Parisian public would get an idea of American music as being wild, incoherent, and not having much sense. Mr. Slonimsky would have served the cause of American music better had he performed one of the charming poetic pieces by Charles Martin Loeffler, a suite by Arthur Foote, and perhaps a piece by Deems Taylor." So he gave me a program which of course would have been perfectly safe. But this was not the point.



Well, Ives really blew his top. He wrote an indignant letter about [Hale]. I mean, of course he didn't write in print; he wrote it to me. He called Hale "Auntie Hale," and in his memos he actually called [Hale] either a fool or a crook. So he was really, really aroused. Of course, he never said anything in print. Now that his memos, his diaries have been published. . . . I mean, they are not really diaries, they are memos to himself, and you undoubtedly know all those books. Well, anyway, I became involved, I needn't tell you, very deeply in all this sort of thing.

Then the next year I went to Berlin--that was, of course, before Hitler--and I played a very ambitious program. Again a piece of Ives, A Symphony: Holidays, and a remarkable Cuban piece by Amadeo Roldán, La Rebambaramba. And that produced quite. . . .





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MARCH 17, 1977

BERTONNEAU: We were just about to discuss the Berlin concert.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. The Berlin concert, that was in 1932. And there I introduced the Cuban score by Amadeo Roldán--it was called La Rebambaramba--requiring a huge orchestra and a group of Cuban percussion instruments which were completely novel to Europe at that time, with of course maracas and claves. Now they are known all over the world; but at that time it was something new. And I had conducted some concerts in Cuba just before then, including the work of Ives, of course. So I brought all these instruments with me to Berlin. One instrument that was called "the lion's roar" (or simply core drum), in German, I translated it Löwengebrüll. And they were just--those men were just like children playing with those instruments. And I had the Berlin Philharmonic.

BERTONNEAU: This was in itself extraordinary.

SLONIMSKY: This was quite extraordinary. Because in Paris I had a pickup orchestra--I mean, a good orchestra, but a pickup orchestra. But in Berlin I had the Berlin Philharmonic. I'll never forget how the first trumpet player played the initial solo on a muted trumpet in Cowell's piece called Synchrony. That was about a four-minute solo introducing



this work, and the effect was simply extraordinary. The way he played it was indescribable. I don't believe I ever heard a muted trumpet played this way with this kind of virtuosity. And they were extremely cooperative. They were fascinated by this music, because it was new, you know. The Germans were very thoroughgoing. They were not like the French, who could dismiss the whole thing as some kind of whimsical exercise. They were tremendously interested in what was in that music, and they played magnificently. I don't believe I ever heard such performances of this music. And, of course, Ives's pieces, I had no difficulty whatsoever. There were, again, two concerts, and the first concert aroused really quite a sensation. In fact, it produced a minor scandal--or maybe a major scandal--of people who were determined to sabotage the concert. They came in with German housekeys, you know, that could be blown and produced quite a shrill effect. The final piece of the first concert was Arcana by Varèse. Arcana--of course, now it's a classic; the Los Angeles Philharmonic began its season with Arcana several years ago. But at that time, 1932 in Berlin, it was just something absolutely unthinkable. And this and Ives and the Rebambaramba [tape static]--all this created quite an uproar. I remember one paper had the headline, "Mit Hausschlüsseln gegen die klingende Geometrie." This requires



explanation: "With Housekeys against the Sounding Geometry." The point was that I described Varèse's music in my program notes as "geometry in sound," so they picked it up: "With Housekeys against the Geometry of Sound." I had quite a bit of coverage in the German press, and also the incipient Nazi press, in 1932--an extraordinary review in a paper called Germania, in which I was denounced and America was denounced. The whole thing was declared as some kind of a Jewish plot, and there wasn't a single Jewish work in the program; not a single Jewish composer was represented. But others were extremely laudatory, and particularly for me. I must say that I never imagined that I would obtain such criticism in Berlin, because Berlin at that time was the most sophisticated and the most severe type of city to conquer in this way. I remember that Alfred Einstein wrote in the Berliner Tageblatt--so even now at the distance of forty-five years it's still embarrassing to quote what he said--but he said something like "As to the conductor, Nicolas Slonimsky, this is a talent of the first magnitude, possessing an almost elemental capacity of subduing both the orchestra and audience." I think I remember the German text, but this was quite a thing. And then I think it was [Heinrich] Strobel who wrote, "No word of praise is sufficient to describe the work of Nicolas Slonimsky," and so forth. [laughter] It was absolutely fantastic, the titles,



the encomium that I. . . . One paper said, "Herr Slonimsky ist ein dirigiertechischer Phänomen" ("a phenomenon of conducting technique"). Well, of course, to them it was phenomenal because I could master those scores. Another critic said, "That he could master these devilish scores with such assurance and impress his knowledge on the Berlin Philharmonic was an extraordinary feat." Well, anyway. . . .

BERTONNEAU: Do you have any idea why, if in fact the story is true, the American embassy in Berlin was asking people to boycott the concert?

SLONIMSKY: Well, you see, here I have the evidence of only one source. I have David Wooldridge, who is a man of great talent, in many respects, but also of great romantic imagination. Now, see, here we find the situation where somebody told something to Klemperer; then thirty years later Klemperer reported it to Wooldridge. Now what can we say about it?

BERTONNEAU: We can't know for certain.

SLONIMSKY: It is hardly conceivable that the American embassy under any circumstances, even if we were all Communists or anything like that, would have said anything like that. It just doesn't sound like--what they probably told Klemperer was they had no connection with this concert, which was absolutely true. They didn't know the organization, which was called the Pan-American Association of Composers, but that meant just us, and the money was the money given by Charles





Ives. Again, Charles Ives, of course, financed the entire undertaking, and when I wrote him that I was running short of money, he sent me more money. I mean, it was as simple as that. So I imagine that Klemperer simply misinterpreted it because he wanted to have the score and he found the American embassy had no connection with it. But no diplomat would ever say anything like that. Even if it were a subversive organization, they wouldn't have said anything of the sort. So I discount this story as simply a misinterpretation on the part of Klemperer, and then on the part of Wooldridge. And again, I say that was 1932; Wooldridge heard this story in 1970--[laughter] after all, something like thirty-eight years later. So it might be imagined.

However, I understand that there were actual fights in the audience. There was a Hungarian Communist who had an encounter with a budding Nazi in the hall, that the Hungarian Communist was, of course, for this kind of music and the Nazi was against this kind of music. But I could not verify that or anything. However, the next morning, the American papers ran an AP dispatch saying "Riot at Slonimsky's Concert." And I had a cable from my family in Boston asking me, "What happened at your concert? Front page dispatches say there was a riot." So I said to myself, "Well, I didn't notice that riot." I mean, there was some booing and hissing and applause.



BERTONNEAU: Was it at that concert that you made a phonograph recording of hissing from the audience after the. . . ?

SLONIMSKY: No, that is something else again. You must have read a lot of clippings of mine; or maybe that was--oh, yes, I know what that was. That was a separate concert. That was a concert I conducted with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, as a matter of fact.

BERTONNEAU: Oh, then, I think I want to talk about that specifically in a minute. I just wanted to ask you briefly before we get to that about the concert you gave in Budapest, which seems in 1932 to be an unlikely place to give a concert of American music.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, I know, but it was a tremendous success there. You see, what I was doing--I had a certain amount of money from Ives, and at that time the currencies in Europe were very low. You could give a concert for a few hundred dollars. You could hire a hall; you could hire an orchestra and conduct your concert. And Budapest was receptive. I had friends there. So I went to Budapest, and I conducted, again, two concerts, and a similar program, which was a tremendous, tremendous success. I met some of the players who played in the orchestra there who have now become eminent Israeli composers. I met them in Tel Aviv thirteen years ago, and they still remembered every detail of this concert, particularly the Cuban numbers, and of course the Ives pieces. I conducted



Varèse's works everywhere and also Cowell's works everywhere. So, yes, you say that was an unlikely place. In fact, I hoped to continue it, give another series of concerts the next year. I arranged for concerts in Prague and other places. And then that, of course, was 1933, and so the curtain came down. [ironic laughter]

BERTONNEAU: History turned against you.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, history. And also even Ives himself said that perhaps this was not the time to give these concerts.

Now, Varèse was extraordinary in all these things. He supplied the optimistic note. He wrote me letters, always in French, which are extraordinary in the light of Varèse's own posthumous reputation. He said, yes, he wrote me in French, "Marchons ensemble"--[laughter] almost like the Marseillaise, you know--"Marchons ensemble et la victoire sera à nous." I mean, this sort of thing.

BERTONNEAU: You can almost sing it, too.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. I have all those letters, and I reproduced them in my book, Music Since 1900. I also published most of the letters of Charles Ives, except those where he was too rough on some conductors and other people, or had too much praise for me, or talked about my personal matters, my family, and so forth.

BERTONNEAU: You came back from Europe, then, in 1932, and you came to the West Coast fairly soon after that.



SLONIMSKY: Yes, that's true.

BERTONNEAU: And you gave the first performances of Ives on the West Coast with the San Francisco Orchestra.

SLONIMSKY: Oh, yes, a San Francisco group, a small ensemble. [the Pan-American Ensemble] But then the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

BERTONNEAU: And there's an almost famous concert you gave in the Hollywood Bowl. I'd like you to talk about that.

SLONIMSKY: Well, I gave a whole series of concerts in the Hollywood Bowl. But before that I conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic in a pair of concerts in December 1932. This was the same year that I conducted in Berlin, so I made quite a trip. And of course, in between, don't forget travel by boat and train, no planes, to California--three and a half days, you know, [laughter] so not so simple, or maybe two and a half days even by express train. Not even air conditioning, except in the diner.

So then I got this engagement in Los Angeles, with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. And I played Three Places in New England, although I played only two places in New England (I had to omit the first one). Then I played Ruggles. And I played a group of fanfares. That was at the Hollywood Bowl. Well, anyway, the program was more or less of similar nature, and the reception was not too violent; it was just so-so with the Los Angeles Philharmonic.





But I had an extraordinary reception in the radical press. See, at that time--it was now, goodness gracious, forty-five years ago--at that time there was a radical group in California. This was the time after the economic crash and the first year of Roosevelt, and I remember Upton Sinclair, the writer, was actually the candidate for the Democratic nomination for governor of California. His chances became so great that [William Randolph] Hearst had to put in a million dollars to get some Republican nonentity to oppose Upton Sinclair. And of course Upton Sinclair lost. It's amazing to recall that Sinclair's program was, of course, completely revolutionary; it was practically a Bolshevik program. He thought that every person over the age of sixty-five should receive \$100 a month. Now, that was rabid socialism. [laughter] Of course, now I get \$240.50 a month, and it's not regarded as socialism or subversion. [laughter] Well, that was an extraordinary time. And in music there was a similar upheaval. For instance, the radio station was actually seized--I mean, not physically, but seized by a group of radical poets, writers, musicians and so forth, and I became sort of their spokesman. And I remember one article appeared--unfortunately I don't even remember the name of that magazine. I really ought to investigate in the research library. There was a magazine, a weekly, or maybe a biweekly; it was an illustrated publication, very left, and on glossy



paper. And there was a guy named José Rodriguez, and he published an article with the caption, "Old Mare Gets a Shot in the Arm." Now, the state of my English was such that I read it literally--"Shot in the Arm"--and I couldn't understand who shot the old mare and why. [laughter] I read the article, and the article said that the Los Angeles Philharmonic sounded moribund and without spirit--and that was under the conductorship of [Artur] Rodzinski, who certainly was not moribund or anything like that and certainly had plenty of energy--and that I injected this orchestra with a new spirit. Of course, I didn't conduct only Ives and Varèse and so forth. I conducted also [Jean] Sibelius, and the same person said that the Sibelius work sounded like something new. I conducted Ravel, I conducted Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition (Ravel's orchestration), and I conducted Mozart. I conducted everything, you know. It wasn't limited.

And on the strength of my European reviews, I was engaged to conduct practically a whole season at the Hollywood Bowl, again because this radical group seized power. I don't know how they managed it. Well, but the real financial power was in the hands of old women, who certainly didn't care for the kind of stuff I was doing. Well, anyway, I was engaged to conduct the following summer, conduct a certain number of concerts, originally for the entire season,



and then it was reduced to four weeks, and then two weeks. Among other things I played--now I had several concerts to plan, so I played Ionisation by Varèse, and that's for percussion only and two sirens. You can just imagine this kind of show at the Hollywood Bowl forty-five years ago. And I remember old Alfred Hertz, the bearded German conductor who was called the father of the Hollywood Bowl because he inaugurated those concerts way back in 1923--he came to one of my rehearsals. I was conducting Ionisation, and of course the players couldn't get those rhythms. I mean, they just couldn't, couldn't play five to a beat. It came out four-plus, or four then a stop and a rest and then the fifth beat. It was a complete disaster. So I remember I went to the drummer, and I beat out those tempi. I indicated it should be one, two, three, four five--one, two three, four, five,--one, two, three, four, five--but there were occasional rests in between within the figure of five notes to a beat. So as I said, I beat the drum, and after the rehearsal Hertz asked me whether I was a professional drummer. I said I never beat the drum in my life. [laughter] So he said, "Well, how could you show him what to do?" So I said, "Well, I could show him what to do because I know what rhythm it had to be."

Well, anyway, then I conducted a group of very short pieces called fanfares, which I commissioned from various composers, just a few bars. I composed one myself, and also there



was a fanfare by Stravinsky, which was written much earlier, and one by Prokofiev. So I collected all those short pieces, which were originally published in a magazine actually called Fanfare, a magazine published in London in 1922 or 1923. Well, anyway, so each piece was preceded by that fanfare.

Anyway, the kind of programs that I did at the Hollywood Bowl was never to be repeated. The management and those old women who were giving money to the Hollywood Bowl were just besided themselves with fury, and finally they told the manager to pay me off but get me out because attendance began to fall, and so forth, even though I had soloists, and I did my best to please the audience. Even after I left there was quite a virulent exchange of opinions, mostly against me, in the papers, mostly in the Los Angeles Times.

BERTONNEAU: You also conducted on one of those programs a work that you had written using quarter tones.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. My goodness, how do you know all those things? Yes, very true. I wrote an overture on ancient Greek themes [Overture on an Ancient Greek Theme, in the Enharmonic Mode.] Now, of course, the Greeks had the so-called enharmonic scale, which contained two quarter tones. And I produced those quarter tones. I mean, I made sure that those quarter tones were real quarter tones (and not just instruments playing off pitch) by directing the violin players to raise the E string a quarter tone, and the violas and the





cellos to raise the A string, their highest string, a quarter tone. They were real quarter tones, so the rest of the notes were played on the lower three strings, and this quarter-tone string was reserved for passages when the quarter tone was needed. So it was a real quarter tone, because this was tuned definitely in advance. It was an open string, and used only for quarter tones. And since I needed two quarter tones, one on E and one on A, it was absolutely guaranteed correct. Yes, that's true, I conducted that little piece, and something else.

Now, in between, all kinds of things happened. The most important thing was that I managed to record some of the works of Ives, Varèse, and Ruggles.

BERTONNEAU: This would have been in Havana?

SLONIMSKY: Well, in Havana I played Ionisation and so forth. But in Havana there was no difficulty, because they were not poisoned by critics or by established opinion. In Havana their own music was so radical that [the music of] Varèse and Ives was quite natural to them. They actually could play it and rehearse it better than New York musicians or Hollywood musicians because they were not prejudiced against it.

And also at the Hollywood Bowl I played Schoenberg's piece, called Accompaniment to a Cinema Scene. Now, Schoenberg had never been performed in California up to that time--that was 1933--and Schoenberg himself was very appreciative of it.



He was a very embittered person, and the fact that I conducted this piece even before he arrived in California proved to him that I was the good guy and the rest were bad guys. Of course, his Verklärte Nacht was perhaps played in Los Angeles, but his twelve-tone music was never heard in Los Angeles until I performed this piece at the Hollywood Bowl.

BERTONNEAU: And hardly at all even after he arrived here, until well after his death.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, I know, but, see, that was even before he arrived here. And I played it also in Havana.

BERTONNEAU: I wanted to talk a little about the recordings you made of that music, just want to follow up on the one story about recording the hisses from the audience. You said that that was at the Hollywood Bowl.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. Well, what I did when I was in Los Angeles, I recorded some of my concerts on one of those acoustic disks, which of course were very poor--I mean, the sound was ridiculous; it almost sounded like the Edison rolls and the Edison cylinders. So I recorded some of those concerts. I arranged with the radio engineer to record them backstage; there were no microphones in front of the orchestra. So the recordings were of extremely poor quality. Nevertheless, you could hear some hisses after Ionisation and after the Ives piece. I have those recordings somewhere. I mean,



they were disks, of course, no tapes. [laughter] You realize this was 1933; this was practically prehistory. So I repeat, they were not commercial recordings; they were just disks recorded backstage.

BERTONNEAU: You went back to the East Coast, then you went back to Havana. Was it in Havana that you recorded three or four works that you'd been doing?

SLONIMSKY: No, in Havana I recorded nothing. There were no facilities whatsoever. But then when I came back to Boston and New York, particularly in New York in 1934, Cowell and Varèse and Ives and myself and Riegger and others, we discussed the possibility of recording some of the pieces I conducted. Of course, an orchestral recording was out of the question because of the cost involved, but I wanted to record at least smaller pieces. So we went to various companies, and, of course, they all turned us down. Ives was in the background--I mean, he didn't want to participate in it openly--but Varèse tried awfully hard, and Cowell of course and myself. No results whatsoever. The Victor Company, which was approached, replied in a letter that, "We are making our own selection of works to be performed, and therefore unfortunately we cannot consider your offer of recording the works of Ives, Varèse, Cowell, and so forth." Then Ives wrote me--and I think I can quote his letter almost verbatim--he said, "Radio and phonograph are hitched



together with business. They record only 'ta-ta' music. Just look at their G--d--- catalogs: all the same. But if a child is fed candy all the time, then the oat-meal companies will have to go out of business, and the child will never receive proper nutrition." And then Ives said, "But we'll manage somehow to overcome this resistance."

So we engaged a pickup orchestra, and I recorded a little piece, "Washington's Birthday," from Ives's Holidays; a little movement of Ruggles; and I finally managed to--not I really--Varèse induced Columbia to record Ionisation.

BERTONNEAU: Which you conducted.

SLONIMSKY: I conducted.

BERTONNEAU: This was maybe the most remarkable conducting session ever held, wasn't it?

SLONIMSKY: Well, you see, what happened was this: first we hired the regular musicians of the New York Philharmonic and other orchestras. So I began to conduct them. They could not play at all. I mean, they could not count, and they could not manipulate the instruments, such as Chinese blocks, claves, even maracas, and of course we had to get sirens (Varèse got the sirens from the fire department, as specified). They could not do it. So in desperation I appealed to composers, who could of course do anything. So I believe that this session had probably the most celebrated





personnel ever. Carlos Salzedo, the famous harpist, played the Chinese blocks, which were a very important part, rhythmically a very important part. Henry Cowell played tone clusters on the piano. Varèse himself was in charge of the sirens, which he cranked up. Others [included] William Schuman, who played the lion's roar. I had no idea that he was there (of course, he was still in his twenties). But when Bill Schuman gave a lecture here in Los Angeles about ten years ago, he said that there are many friends in the audience, and he named me and said that "Nicolas Slonimsky was instrumental in giving me my first professional engagement to play the lion's roar in the recording session of Ionisation." He said, "He never reengaged me. Apparently I was not satisfactory." Which was very funny. Then I met Paul Creston several years ago, and he told me that he played the anvil. Wallingford Riegger played, oh, the glockenspiel, I think. So as I say, this was quite a celebrity personnel. The result was that the recording was actually authentic; the rhythms came out. And this recording is now a collector's item, of course. But I had it rerecorded and issued by the Orion Masterworks record company here in Los Angeles [Three Historic Premieres]. And that record of Ionisation, made forty-two years ago, still stands up very well. The Ives piece so-so, and the Ruggles. . . .

But, see, the remarkable thing remains that I conducted



the first recordings ever of any work of Ives, Varèse, and Ruggles. Not a bad feat of first performances. Now, of course, I always say that this didn't mean that I was so wonderful; it simply meant to us that others, be that conductors and recording companies, for instance, were way behind the times. So if I merit any kind of accolade--as now I'm given for something I did forty years ago--it's because I was absolutely convinced that those works had validity. We all would have been satisfied even if accorded just validity, nothing more. Now, of course, it appears that those works are masterpieces of modern music. And the composers--Ives, Varèse, Ruggles, Cowell--they are top names. And those composers who were regarded as commercial forty years ago have all but disappeared. So there is a lesson for an historian of aesthetic trends. Draw your own conclusions. So I happened to be involved in it, and I must say that while I can be very proud of it--well, how can one be proud that he knew or guessed something that was obvious, and should have been obvious at the time ([even though] it took twenty or thirty years to catch up)? However, I would not surrender my priority of having done what I had done in those times. Again, it was not entirely my merit. Varèse and Cowell were the acting people. Ives, of course, was in the background, and, needless to say, he again financed those records and financed everything. And again he wrote me one of those



letters that Mrs. Ives felt it was unfair to me that I was doing all this work without compensation and sent me a check.

BERTONNEAU: Did you do much conducting after 1934?

SLONIMSKY: Not much. See, after that, first of all, I was already sort of classified or categorized as a person who conducts this kind of program that nobody wanted.

BERTONNEAU: Would it be appropriate to say you were stigmatized by it?

SLONIMSKY: I was stigmatized by it--yes, that was the word I was looking for. I was really stigmatized. So there were several attempts to get me an orchestra. As a matter of fact, the personnel, about half of the orchestra, the members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, signed a petition to the manager to engage me as the permanent conductor. That was in 1934. It was, of course, contrived by various well-wishers, but those members of the orchestra were willing to sign their names under this petition. Needless to say, it was never even half-considered.

BERTONNEAU: It's somewhat ironic that Otto Klemperer received that position, the man who was so intrigued by your playing in Berlin.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, well, Otto Klemperer after all was a great conductor, was a conductor par excellence. This was his métier. I was--I don't know what my role was as a conductor.



Now I have no opinion whatsoever. And yet sometimes, once in ten years, I go over those write-ups in Paris, and particularly in Berlin, signed by top names of the critics, and I say, "My God, I must have had something, because they couldn't have been all fooled if they used such superlatives." And at that time it was in a way almost a tragedy to me that I could not go on conducting, because I had so many ideas of how to conduct, not just modern pieces but old classics. I thought of what I could do to the Beethoven symphonies by emphasizing the purely tonal qualities. I was simply obsessed by this idea, and I wrote letters and asked my manager to send out circulars. I had all those reviews reproduced, a special circular with my silhouette as a conductor, which was done by a very remarkable painter [Otto Wiedemann] in Berlin during my rehearsals (it was a remarkable silhouette). And nothing. I just couldn't get one single engagement. Now that was, as I say, thirty-five years ago, and then gradually I realized that it was no use. So I conducted sporadically. The last time I conducted was during the Ives centennial, and then I did some conducting in South America and so forth. But at that time it was to me a terrible disappointment because I thought that I had something that I could produce. And then I say to myself that those reviews in Paris and in Berlin could not have been completely erroneous, particularly reviews by such top critics. I remember that Roger Sessions





was in Berlin at the time, and we were together a lot. He said that he had never read any such reviews in the Berlin press as I got in 1932; that's forty-five years ago. Well, apparently something was wrong with me, or with the world, or I don't know what. And looking back, perhaps it's just as well. I ask myself sometimes, what if I had received an orchestra, even the Los Angeles Philharmonic at that time (not a major orchestra), or some small orchestra, and I could have built it up to a degree of excellence--then what? After ten or fifteen years I would wind up like so many of those conductors, some of them excellent conductors. There was a conductor who conducted the Chicago Orchestra. [Désiré Defauw] He was famous in Paris. He conducted the Chicago Orchestra, and he did not make an impression there, didn't make good. Well, finally he wound up with the Gary, Indiana, Orchestra and died. . . .



TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO

MARCH 19, 1977

BERTONNEAU: Last time we talked we came to the end of your conducting career. After you conducted Ives and Varèse, you were, as you said, almost stigmatized. You found it very difficult to get conducting engagements. But you were pursuing other careers at the same time. I think around 1934 you composed a work which was, well, almost expected from a composer of Russian background. These were the Silhouettes Ibériennes for piano, and I wonder if you wouldn't tell us about those.

SLONIMSKY: Well, as a matter of fact, it wasn't much Russian, in that this represented my second period, so to speak, which was the period of breathless imitation of premodern music, premodern because the tonality was there, and there was an exotic atmosphere, or a pseudoexotic atmosphere, which was attractive to many composers in the 1920s. I was actually late coming on the scene with this kind of stuff. Of course, Spain was the magnet of composers of all lands, particularly French and Russian composers. So in this respect you can perhaps say that my Russian background had something to do with my getting into Spanish music. Basically, it was an attempt to write a piano suite that pianists would play when they had all of [Isaac] Albéniz and all of [Enrique] Granados and all of Manuel de Falla and



all of Debussy and all of [Emmanuel] Chabrier. It didn't work out. I had it published, and I had a few performances, mostly by myself, and then a couple of pianists here and there played it. Then I arranged it for the violin, and Jascha Heifetz played it as an encore--and that was the first and last performance as they say. It was the world premiere and the world dernière. [laughter] So that was that. But still, at that time I was very eager to write pieces that would be successful. I suppose partially I was motivated by a desire to get some sustenance, financial sustenance, out of it. I was very naive, of course. So that was 1934. That was a wasted effort. Still, the piece was published, and very recently it was performed in a completely new guise by the Brazilian guitar player [Laurindo] Almeida, who arranged it for two guitars and played a duet with himself. And this has been recorded. In fact, he got wonderful write-ups for his part of it. He said he liked the pieces very much--well, possibly he did. I was a little bit embarrassed by this composition receiving sort of a permanent form--well, as much permanence as accompanies any kind of recording. Nevertheless, not only did I consent to this revival, but I actually urged the guitar player to make that arrangement. Well, so much for this suite, three movements, Silhouettes Ibériennes.

BERTONNEAU: What were some of the others you wrote around



this time?

SLONIMSKY: Well, other compositions were a terribly mixed lot. For instance, about the same time I wrote a waltz ["The Haunting Horn"] based on an automobile horn, the theme "Ta RA, ra RAAH." That was the time of the flivver and the flapper. So I made a pretty waltz, without any pretense whatsoever. It would be unfair even to call it imitative because, see, if something is imitative at least it's successful, but it wasn't successful even in its imitation. All I can say in defense of all those compositions is that they are decently put together--that is, the craft is there in their style. There's absolutely no justification for trying to revive these pieces, because of low musical value. Still, I was a good harmony student--the same pieces were [exercises at the] conservatory--so at least I knew how to manage my harmonies in the very traditional manner. So there was that waltz.

Then there was a group of pieces which I hoped kids would play. It was a suite of piano pieces "for ambitious young pianists" [Four Picturesque Pieces for Ambitious Pianists]. See, I hoped that this subtitle would sell, and I was quite frank about it. And yet I cannot say that it was a cold-blooded attempt to make money with it. I really felt something composing those pieces--I mean, feeling the emotion. Again, as I say, the inspiration was





of a very low quality. Nevertheless, again I say the pieces were aptly crafted. And they bore such titles as "Kiddies on the Keys," on black keys, sort of a music box, and "Little Overture" [actually "The Opening of the Piano"] and so forth. Then I orchestrated them, and there were performances. The Boston Pops performed them once or twice. And some of these pieces have been republished without my being aware of it, you see, because after twenty-eight years, if you don't renew your copyright, then anyone can pick it up. So one fine day I received a package from a friend of mine who was connected with the Library of Congress, without an accompanying letter. It was a collection of piano pieces entitled "Twelve Twentieth Century Composers" [actually American Composers of the Twentieth Century--Twelve Compositions in Their Original Form for Piano], and there was my visage as of 1930, and then the work of the composers. I couldn't even understand where it came from. So I opened the anthology, and to my horror I found a piece called "Dreams and Drums" solemnly reproduced there. [It was] originally written in 1931, and copyright expired in 1958, so somebody picked it up. As a matter of fact, I found out how it's done. There is one person [John W. Schaum] who goes to the Library of Congress every spring, and he scavenges over all easy pieces, piano pieces, songs, stuff like that, not big pieces; he salvages



and collects them and republishes them. Okay, no harm done, except to my reputation.

Then there were all kinds of pieces that I was writing, but particularly songs. The reason I was writing songs so much was that I was a professional accompanist and I could always persuade the man or woman whom I accompanied to include a couple of my songs; that was easy enough. And then there was at least one celebrated singer who sang my songs--this was Roland Hayes, the black singer who was an amazing lieder performer. He picked up some of my songs, two songs to words by Oscar Wilde ["Silhouettes" and "Flight of the Moon," collectively titled Impressions] and one song which I like until this day, called "My Little Pool," extremely short and based on my principle of using consonances within intertonal context--that is, two-part counterpoint, consonant intervals only, but a completely free modulation plan.

BERTONNEAU: This is the song that Ives liked, isn't it?

SLONIMSKY: Yes, well, how did you know that? Oh, yes, it must have been in one of his letters. See, at that time I was naive enough to send those songs and my articles, of course, to Ives. As I believe I told you last time, Ives was a very, very peculiar man in this respect. You see, if somebody was a good man, as he said--not a nice person, but good, and I was certainly good, [laughter] so I was one of



the very few whom he accepted without reservations. So in a way, I must say that his opinion really had no objective validity. To me it was, of course, very, very pleasing. First of all, it was long before Ives became a cult object. See, at that time Ives was just an eccentric composer who had a few people around him like myself and Cowell and perhaps Varèse and others who believed in his genius. And this song, when I sent him this song, well, he reacted that way. He liked it. He said that it was better than the pool they had around the house. This was very typical of him. And Roland Hayes also said in his autobiography that he liked that song and that he sang it everywhere. Unfortunately, he did not record it. He planned to record it, and then he had very little chance to make records because his voice already was giving way; he was in his sixties. So the song was not recorded by Roland Hayes. But it was sung a lot and had some very nice reviews. And again I say that that particular song is quite valid because I used a special technique which I believe has its justification.

And there were other songs, all kinds of songs. I had a set of flower songs [Garden Songs]. I had all kinds of things. [laughter] I'm not particularly proud of recalling that period, but--well, anyway, I tried.

BERTONNEAU: I'll ask you about one song that you wrote somewhat earlier than these, and that's one called "I Owe a



Debt to a Monkey."

SLONIMSKY: Yes, as a matter of fact I can tell you exactly when that was written. It must have been written in 1926 because that was at the time of the Scopes trial in Tennessee--see, this evolution business--and there were all kinds of jokes about it, and I wrote this song, "I Owe a Debt to a Monkey." I think I called it "a song of evolution" or something like that for the subtitle. That was performed by some singers and I had it recorded. It had some interest in it--at least, the humorous part was well expressed--and I should say that it was in the style of the 1920s, English 1920s, I mean the kind of songs that Eugene Goossens wrote and other English composers and some American composers who had a sense of humor. It was deliberately dissonant because of the words. And this also had no future. It was performed a few times, it was recorded, and that was that.

BERTONNEAU: Around 1938 I think, you recorded something which I have not heard, but it intrigues me to read about it, and that was your Little Suite for chamber group with percussion and a typewriter.

SLONIMSKY: This was actually an orchestration for a small ensemble of my Studies in Black and White. Now, in my Studies in Black and White, I had a movement which was called "Typographical Errors." My intention was to portray





typographical errors, but again in consonances, unrelated consonances, so that it sounded dissonant; but if you examined the actual vertical lines, there wasn't a dissonance in a carload. So naturally I used a typewriter in this particular combination. I was not the first. [Paul] Hindemith used the typewriter in an earlier orchestral suite and I believe in a little chamber opera, Neues vom Tage (I think there was the typewriter there). So there was no innovation. But in the suite it sounded very well in its new arrangement, and again it had several performances. In fact, there was a recent performance in Fullerton, and before that at UCLA. So I was getting a few performances here and there, but again without much of a future.

BERTONNEAU: One of the works you recorded in the 1970s was the Fifty Minitudes. Of the works which you've written which I've had the opportunity to hear, those certainly are among the most interesting.

SLONIMSKY: Yes.

BERTONNEAU: I wonder if you would just tell a little bit about those.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, well, of course, those Minitudes--of course there are mini-tudes; they are not mini-etudes, but minititudes; I collapsed the title--they are all very short. And I wrote about fifty of them, some of them five or ten seconds long. So they really are minititudes and may represent my latest



avatar, if I can use this phrase, because each embodies some definite technique and a characteristic that to me is very important. I always felt that each piece ought to be a lecture and a sermon in techniques as well as in expression. So I stand by my Minitudes.

But of course the Minitudes themselves were based on my Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns, which was published in 1947, and which is probably the most important and perhaps the only important work that I've done in the field of musical theory or technique. Now obviously, in a conversation like this, I'm not going to be self-deprecatory and self-condemning all the time because that is a pose. Many people who write their autobiographies just damn everything that they had ever done or pretend that they really had no skill, that they just put it over on the crowd. Now, of course, I did a lot of that. But there are certain things that I did that represent my outlook on music; so why should I minimize whatever merit there is in it? So I will have to return to that Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns, which was an outgrowth of all of my ideas about techniques.

Now, I suppose I ought to tell the genesis of this particular work. My concern with techniques goes back to my early Studies in Black and White, because there was already some definite premise, an assumption, a hypothesis--



or rather a restriction which resulted in a certain style. I'm a believer in restrictions. I admire a person who published a novel in English tying down his typewriter key on the letter e so [he wrote] a whole novel in English without using the letter e, which of course is the most frequent letter in the English alphabet. Now, I don't know whether this kind of exercise is useful in any way, but I suspect that it's no less useful than yoga exercises for the body or transcendental meditation for the mind--not that I believe in transcendental meditation or for that matter in yoga exercises. But still I felt that a musician as a technician ought to be able to write music under certain restrictions. After all, counterpoint is a restrictive discipline, and some of contrapuntal restrictions really don't make any sense; and so is the twelve-tone technique of Schoenberg. So if you impose a certain restriction, then a style will inevitably emerge. So I began working on sort of a universal theory of music, which would include not only common major and minor scales and modes but combinations of intervals that are used in modern music but are not found in theory books. For instance, there is the so-called Rimsky-Korsakov scale which is a scale of alternating tones and semitones. Rimsky-Korsakov was not the first to use it, but it's a scale that is related to the diminished seventh chord, and you'll find it in classical works, in romantic works,



perhaps under a different name. You can call it a conjuncture of two minor tetrachords--and this will sound very learned, and perhaps it will be acceptable to the academics. But the fact is that the scale is used a great deal. It has been in use for more than a hundred years, and yet you will not find it in any book on harmony. The same goes for certain harmonic combinations and modulations that do not follow any particular key. And you don't find that either in any books on harmony because all harmony books are continuations and developments of the theories established by Rameau and then picked up by German professors and organized into a system that seems to be so rigid as not to account for actual practices. Even Rimsky-Korsakov's book on harmony [Practical Manual of Harmony], which I studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and which is an excellent book in its way doesn't account for many processes used by Rimsky-Korsakov himself, which is certainly very peculiar. And then there are, of course, the usual restrictions. "Thou shalt not do this and that," [laughter] and then of course everybody does it. So it's misleading. But Rimsky-Korsakov allowed--at the end of his book he said in small print in the footnote to the final chapter on modulation, "Exceptionally talented pupils may disregard these restrictions and modulate into foreign keys," and so forth and so on. Or use the so-called "cross-relation"--let's say C-sharp in





one voice and then C-natural in the next chord in another voice. You are supposed to go from C to C-sharp and then to D; that's the proper procedure. But if this chromatic mood travels from one voice to another, well, this is not kosher.

Well, so I experimented with certain combinations which I had already begun using in my own compositions that concerned scales and also harmonies. And then I asked myself this question: why should all scales be eight notes in range? Even [Ferruccio] Busoni, who was a very forward looking individual and published a book on modern theory, modern aesthetics [Sketch of a New Aesthetic in Music]  
-- he wrote a set of contrapuntal exercises for two pianos which used unusual scales, but those unusual scales were always scales of, well, seven different notes and then the octave limit. This was in itself a restriction.

So I decided to start from scratch, just ignore all history of music. I said to myself, well, let's divide the scale into two equal parts instead of two unequal parts as in traditional scales, where there are modal progressions of major and minor. So, instead of going from the tonic to the dominant, from the dominant to the tonic, I divided the octave into two parts. And of course I got the tritone--that is, the once-forbidden interval, which is called the diabolus in musica by medieval scholars. So naturally if it wasn't a



diabolus in musica, then I had to do something about it. Not that I was the first or even the last in a long series of composers using this type of scales, but it was never put in writing in any theory book. Well, anyway, so I divided the octave into two parts and then I interpolated more notes in between. So I interpolated three notes in the first part, and three notes in the second part of this division. The result was a scale of eight notes, eight different notes, rather than seven different notes plus an octave sound. Okay, well, that was the Rimsky-Korsakov scale; that was the most obvious thing. But then I had combinations in which I followed the number of semitones rather than the idea of tonic dominant. I composed a scale which followed an extremely simple arithmetical progression: three semitones, two semitones, one semitone, three semitones, two semitones, one semitone. Now the result was a six-note scale, and that was something very interesting. Ravel and Debussy and many others used a scale that approximated it, but not precisely this kind of scale. And it was very easy to figure out. Once I started on alternating semitones--two, one, two, one, two, one, two, one--resulting in the Rimsky-Korsakov scale, then I began with three, two, one, three, two, one. Or I could start with two, so it's two, one, three, two, one, three, two, one, three. And lo and behold, then I split the six notes into two parts, meaning



that I played the scale and I skipped every other note. So what did I get? I got one, three, two, one, three, two--semitones. When I omitted every other note, I got two unrelated major triads, which formed the so-called Stravinsky chord, or the Petrouchka chord, because Stravinsky used this combination C major and F-sharp major. Of course, Stravinsky used this combination simply because he wrote Petrouchka at the piano, and so the F-sharp major triad was all black keys, and the C major triad was all white keys, and he simply went from white keys to the black keys. He alternated white and black keys. This became more and more interesting, so I exhausted all possibilities for this division of the octave into two parts, which can be done arithmetically, and you don't have to have any kind of musical imagination. Now, I will--perhaps I will anticipate the denouement of this whole thing. It would be useless for me to give a complete account of the entire book except to say that then I divided the octave into three parts, into four parts, and into six parts, which is the whole tone scale; and into the twelve parts, which, of course, is the chromatic scale. But then I extrapolated notes. So instead of going to the next note, I went to one note beyond and then returned to the original note. Now, this is a perfectly legitimate type of embellishment which has a name, Nota cambiata. So I called these extrapolations--one was



"ultrapolation," that is, "going beyond," and then the other was "infrapolation." So I introduced all those newfangled words. And the result was that I was suddenly getting some very familiar and some very modernistic combinations used by Liszt and even Tchaikovsky--but which were nameless. Well, all right, maybe I shouldn't have called them "infrapolation," and "ultrapolation," and of course "interpolation," which is a regular word. But I was able to organize this whole thing.

Well, anyway, I completed it. And there were some discoveries--I'm tempted to say they were almost fantastic--as to when you took one combination and you juxtaposed another combination, and all of a sudden you got something entirely new or something very familiar. For instance, certain combinations of two mutually exclusive scales resulted in a twelve-tone row. Or I found, for instance, that there was only one way of splitting the twelve notes of the tempered scale into four triads--two major triads and two minor triads--and this was the only way. I had a friend who was going to Germany, and he was a computer specialist, and he said he would try it out on the computer. He went to Germany and tried it out, and my solution was really the only solution possible for a certain combination. Well, anyway, I reached the point when I arranged a chord in twelve different notes--that is simple enough, twelve





different notes--but also eleven different intervals, which was not so simple. And I called it "Grandmother Chord," or in German, Grossmutterakkord. I called it in German because there was Mutterakkord described by Alban Berg fifty years ago; so this was my Grossmutterakkord.

BERTONNEAU: Grossmutterakkord was used for the basis of [Karl-Birger] Blomdahl's opera. . . .

SLONIMSKY: Yes, Aniara. Yes, this was one of those extraordinary things. It was used note for note, even as to sharps and flats, because, of course--for instance, I had it this way: C, B, D-flat, B-flat. . . .

BERTONNEAU: So this all became the Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns. And that was published in 1947?

SLONIMSKY: In 1947.

BERTONNEAU: But your lexicographical work, that was published ten years later.

SLONIMSKY: But that was parallel to it. And, do we have enough tape?

BERTONNEAU: I think so.

SLONIMSKY: Well, I'll wind up this business. So I went to various publishers. First I sent some pages to G. Schirmer--and mine was an excellent relationship with the editors there--and I received a funny letter from an old Germanic-minded editor [Carl Deis] saying that, of course, it's all very



amusing, and that I have a lot of imagination, and he particularly appreciated the fact that the score was multicolored. He said, "We received your multicolored score. It's very amusing, and of course you are a very inventive fellow, and so forth. But this is a commercial publishing house, and we can't take anything like that."

Well, then I found a publisher in Boston [Herbert Coleman of Coleman-Ross] who was just beginning. In fact, he hadn't published anything. He was just starting out, and he was a friend, and I submitted it to him. So he asked me how many copies I thought it would sell. So I said seventeen. [laughter] He said, "Why seventeen?" "Because I only know seventeen people who could afford to pay twelve dollars per volume." (Now, of course, it's twenty-five dollars.) So anyway, it was published, and it got mixed reviews. I mean, some people thought that it was a wonderful basic treatise on modern music of the century and so forth. Others said that it had no meaning whatsoever. The British composer Edmund Rubbra wrote just a paragraph about this book, saying something to the effect that this book doesn't make any sense, even visually. There is a beehive of a chord that the compiler called panpentatonic, which out of context means absolutely nothing. Well, he was wrong.

Well, anyway, it was published. At first it was selling



so slow that I thought that it was really a disaster, particularly for that poor publisher who was losing money on it, but not losing too much money because the engraving cost so little thirty years ago. It was certainly extraordinary, only six dollars a page. Now it would have cost, I don't know, maybe fifty dollars. It's magnificent engraving, 240 pages containing more than 2,000 examples in all kinds of combinations. And then something happened about ten years ago. The sales suddenly picked up. There was a period twenty years ago when the sales practically stopped, so that when a single copy was sold in a month, my publisher would send me a postcard which said, "We made it for this month," meaning that a single copy was sold. And then, as I said, it picked up, and the sales kept increasing, which is against all the customs of publishing. I mean, usually when you publish something, there is a spurt of sales the first few months, and then it goes decrescendo, diminuendo, until it practically dies, and then it's taken off the publisher's list. But here it was really fantastic. Well, anyway, to make a long story short, last year nearly 900 copies were sold, at twenty-five dollars. So my publisher is actually making money on my book, and that's thirty years after publication.

Now, the question is, why? Who is buying it? The answer is, jazz players. They find new material for their



improvisations, breaks, and so forth. And then I found out that people like John Coltrane, the famous saxophone player, told all of his players to get copies of my book. And Stan Kenton, and people like that. All of a sudden they became promoters of my book. They probably didn't know what it was all about, but they knew that it was good material. The told me at Schirmer's in New York, which always keeps a stack of those books there, that they come in and they can't say "Slonimsky," and they can't say "thesaurus." In fact, the chief clerk of the music store downtown here in Los Angeles keeps referring to it as "thesaurius," rather than "thesaurus." But see, they know this scale. And to my absolute surprise, I found this scale in a record store, right next to Elvis Presley, all of a sudden, this thing. Well, anyway, it became something that people were buying. So I have no complaints. [laughter] It went, I think, into the fifth printing. So this is my success story, which doesn't mean that I'll make as much money as, I don't know, the guy who wrote "Purple Piano," or anything like that, far from it. But for a book like that to sell 900 copies a year is simply unprecedented. I don't know of a single parallel work, perhaps the Schillinger method of thirty-five years ago. I worked sort of in parallel with [Joseph] Schillinger, whom I knew very well. Of course, Schillinger initiated





the Schillinger system of composition, and that was quite a fashion for a few years, but now it has practically gone out of existence. And then, of course, Schillinger had a tremendous advantage because he actually taught his system to famous people, including George Gershwin. I mean, George Gershwin used to come to Schillinger to imbibe some of his wisdom the same day as he was going to his psychoanalyst. But this was not my idea. I was not interested in any of that. I was interested in establishing a new kind of classification of scales and harmonies, and I apparently succeeded.

Now, since we were talking about Minitudes, the Minitudes are based on the scales and harmonies of the Thesaurus. In fact, the phonograph record features the Minitudes as at least derived from the Thesaurus, and now the Thesaurus of Scales is a good name because it sells.



TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE

MARCH 19, 1977

BERTONNEAU: The first book you wrote was the one called Music Since 1900. That was in 1937, I think, and that was really the beginning of what we've been calling your lexicographic career. You said, I think, that you don't know exactly how you got pulled into lexicography as a career, but I wonder if you wouldn't give it a try, and try and trace the course of events up to the publication of Music Since 1900.

SLONIMSKY: Well, I became interested in musical evolution, the process whereby certain musical devices forbidden in a previous time became standard and then were discarded as being obsolete, and new devices came along. The aesthetic process in it was fascinating to me, and I wondered whether I could apply the same kinds of methods to music as an art in flux as naturalists apply to living things, or sociologists to changes in society. Now, by that time I had already conducted a number of modern works, and I began noticing certain distinctions in modern works which were purely stylistic; they were almost linguistic. It would be just like tracing the history of the Latin dialects that became the great Romance languages. This was one of my hobbies, languages, particularly in the Romance field, and I began to wonder how come that old music sounds wrong to



modern ears. So there was a definite change of grammar and syntax in music. Now, this was the beginning of my idea of compiling a chronology of music, perhaps year by year, and then maybe even day by day. I thought that things were happening when, let's say, Debussy suddenly began using consecutive chords, or when the taboo on ending a piece in a different key was broken. My intention was to pinpoint the exact dates of such events and if possible to explain why they were happening and how our tastes were changing. That went back even to my days with Koussevitzky, because Koussevitzky played modern works which were not acceptable to Boston or to anybody, and those modern works now, of course, are classics of modern music and almost obsolete. So I thought of a chronology, and I was perhaps influenced in the format of this chronology by a chronology of musical and historic events in general which was published in Germany [Tabellen sur Musikgeschichte by Arnold Schering]. I picked up that old book, and I thought that this type of chronology would be rather interesting.

Since I was interested mainly in the modern period, so I thought of the title Music Since 1900, I didn't want to use the title Modern Music, because "modern music" was very vague (in the British Museum under "modern music" you'll find all music written after 1800). "Contemporary music" was even more misleading, because contemporary to whom?



It's a relative concept. So I began to think in the direction of music since a certain year. Of course, I fully realized that I could not call it Twentieth-Century Music because 1900 was not in the twentieth century. It was not the first year of the twentieth century; it was the last year of the nineteenth century, paradoxical as it seems; and I didn't want to call my book Music in the 1900s because that would have been confused with nineteenth-century music. But above all I wanted a distinctive title that would not be confused with a similar title, other books published by others.

So the idea began to formulate in my mind, and I started on it about 1934, 1935. I began compiling dates, first performances of operas, very sketchily, getting those dates mostly from the program notes of the Boston Symphony. I was still in Boston, and by that time I was often lecturing on the Boston Symphony programs in the Boston Public Library. I was no longer with Koussevitzky, but the annotator of the Boston program notes often quoted me and sometimes used extracts from my articles published in the Boston Evening Transcript, and then in the Christian Science Monitor, and so forth. Well, I began collecting this material, and the more I went through it, the more fascinated I became. I found that old modern composers were dying off, and new composers were emerging. I used





a lot of death dates and also birthdates, and it was interesting, too, for me to realize that there were composers born in the twentieth century who had already acquired a certain eminence--and you musn't forget it was 1937. [The year] 1934, 1935 was the beginning of this book--in 1937 it was published, so there were only thirty-seven years of composers. Then I asked friends among composers, particularly people whom I knew in Russia and Italy, in France, in Germany, in America, everywhere, for dates. And I asked Alfredo Casella to get me the dates of young Italian composers. Of course, "young Italian composers" are now either old or dead. So he gave me the names of many of his pupils, and he urged them to send me biographical information for my book. Recently I found his letters published in the Rivista Musicale Italiana, Casella's letters to Dallapiccola to Gavazzeni to Petrassi and to others urging them to send me this material. And he said that Nicolas Slonimsky is "mio grande amico" and that it would be of great service if they would send this information, and that he anticipated (Casella did) that my book would be of great importance for modern music, including Italian music.

And I was in constant communication with Russian musicologists, who sent me information about their composers, and some of these letters, which I eventually donated to the



Library of Congress, have great documentary value. The Soviet composer Miaskovsky in particular used to write me; every time he would complete a symphony, he would write me a letter.

BERTONNEAU: This would be quite often.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, of course, because he wrote twenty-seven symphonies. He said, "This day I completed my fourteenth symphony, this exact date," and so forth. You see, I was set on exact dates, because, this being a chronology, I arranged it day by day. So I had to know on what particular day--not just month or year, but on what precise date, dates--somebody composed an opera. And I also had some help from Prokofiev, you know. I was very eager to establish the exact dates of composition of Peter and the Wolf; so he supplied those dates. In a recent biography of Prokofiev, I found an anecdote about him. He said that when people pressed him for precise information, he would say, "Well, I don't remember, and I don't have it. Why don't you write Slonimsky in America? He will give you the information." [laughter] And a similar anecdote was also reported about Miaskovsky. So apparently it was a current joke that I had more information than the Soviet composers themselves. And when Kabalevsky and Shostakovitch and Khrennikov and other Soviet composers came here in 1959, Kabalevsky published his impressions, and he had a paragraph about me. He said that



my knowledge about Soviet music was positively amazing, simply because not only did I know what I wanted to know, but I insisted on exact dates. So nobody would ask them the exact date of the completion of a composition, the exact date of the first performance and so forth; and to me it was of great importance because, well, because certain methods were used in certain works which were let's say twelve-tone technique, and it didn't just arise out of nothing.

This was a tremendously difficult problem to decide who, who was on first, so to speak. [laughter] I corresponded with Schoenberg; this was very important. And then in 1934, 1935, I wrote him--it must have been 1935 or 1936; in fact I have the exact date and I should remember it--I wrote him when he was already in California, and I told him that as he knew very well there was a certain controversy about the priority in the genesis of the twelve-tone technique. For instance, there was a man named [Josef] Hauer who claimed that he had anticipated Schoenberg in the formation of the twelve-tone technique. Schoenberg answered me; he at once wrote me a long letter in English (he insisted on writing in English, and it was very clear English). First of all, he denied that he was a revolutionary. Then he said that he was undoubtedly the first to generate the idea of a unified twelve-tone thematics, and then he said



that Hauer and others, of course, knew about it. And in a subsequent postcard he wrote me, "My imitators now want to masquerade as my inspirers." And so I realized that there was quite a polemical tension about it. This letter from Schoenberg, which I published in the very first edition of Music Since 1900, and which was reproduced in subsequent editions, became a very important document, translated into several languages, and so forth. Then I asked Anton von Webern to give me the exact dates of the composition of his miniatures, of his five orchestral pieces which were so short (one of them lasted only nineteen seconds); and he answered at once and gave me all those dates. Then I continued along those lines, the important part being to establish who was the first who promulgated the principle of twelve-tone composition--not who was the first to use all twelve chromatic tones in one chord or anything like that. And I began discovering all kinds of interesting things, that of course historically and theoretically and aesthetically the important thing was that ideas like these were not generated by a single person. Schoenberg really formulated and codified it, but the idea was in the air. And yet the idea of the twelve-tone technique seems to be the most arbitrary, in a way the most puzzling, idea of all technique, more puzzling even than the old rules about the tonal imitation in the fugue which cannot be explained





(because it's not really a tonal imitation because the second subject actually modulates into the dominant), but still this was the rule, and Bach and everybody followed it. And here was something that was born right sort of before our eyes, and it was very new, and it was completely arbitrary and extremely powerful. And of course during the next decades after Schoenberg initiated this theory--now, it's not more than fifty-three years ago, only, that he wrote his first piece in the twelve-tone technique--and so we find now that practically every contemporary composer uses it one way or another. Even Shostakovich, who was dead against any arbitrary, what they call formalistic, ideas, he took it up, and in his last string quartet he uses twelve-tone rows. And so did Ernest Bloch, and so did Benjamin Britten--in a different way, of course. But still it was there. As to other composers, practically all of them used this twelve-tone technique in some way, a modified form, but still. . . . So I was able apparently to pinpoint the precise date when the inspiration came to Schoenberg, because fortunately he notated the date that he completed his first twelve-tone work.

Well, then I began investigating the story of jazz, the generation of the very term jazz. And, of course, there are all kinds of theories that jazz comes from the French jazz which has some kind of a sexual implication. Well,



all those theories aren't worth anything. It's obvious that jazz is an onomatopoeic word that is an imitation of a word like zap or zip or any of those words. And I was not satisfied with the statements of Paul Whiteman and others who, of course, were in the movement when jazz originated about 1918. But I went over the entire file of Variety magazine for those years (not the entire file, but beginning at 1914), and I found reference to a jazz band (spelled J-A-S-S), a band in Chicago in October 1916. So I marked this as the first time when the word jazz was used in print with musical connotations. I was wrong, because since then I discovered that the word jazz (spelled J-A-Z-Z, just as we spell it) was first used in a sports column in a San Francisco paper called Bulletin, in March 1913, in the sense of zest, enthusiasm, but also in the sense of a musical performance. It was specifically applied to a football team that arrived in San Francisco in March 1913, and there was a band, and the columnist said that "they had a lot of what they call jazz," which meant enthusiasm and so forth. And then he said that the same type of jazz is manifested in their music. So here we have that, and then in Chicago three years later. But anyway, I was able to disprove the general idea that jazz originated in New Orleans. That was Dixie band, Dixie ragtime that originated in New Orleans, but the word jazz was never used. I even



corresponded with various musicians who claimed that they invented jazz in New Orleans way back, and one of them sent me a photograph of his conducting what he called "jazz band" in 1908. But on the photograph it showed the bass drum with the words "Dixie Ragtime Band." So even the photograph belied his statement.

Now, under such circumstances, I had to dig deeper and deeper to establish facts. And this was my prime concern, to establish the beginnings of new styles and then perhaps draw some conclusions from it. And parallel to this, I was interested in the reception of what we consider now masterpieces by critics of the period when they were performed.

BERTONNEAU: What did the publishers think when you brought them the manuscript for this book? Were they excited or cautious or what?

SLONIMSKY: See, my first publisher was W.W. Norton, who was a very liberal publisher. Mrs. Norton, who is still living, was a musician herself and a highly educated woman, and she thought this was a very exciting type of thing. It was, of course, unusual, and then I had all kinds of my quirks and ideas. For instance, each item was in a single sentence, no matter how long. That was a purely literary gimmick; why I decided on it, I don't know myself. But, you see, I had to have some kind of gimmick. So it was published in 1937, and it's certainly produced quite an impression.



BERTONNEAU: It's still in print, isn't it?

SLONIMSKY: Yes, it's the fourth edition now out. Now it has 1,600 pages; the first edition was about 750 pages. So it's twice the length of the book, and of course it covers a much greater period. The first edition ended with the death of Ravel in 1937 and the death of Gershwin, also in July 1937. And the new edition reaches the landing on the moon in July 1969. I inserted it--well, I really cannot claim that it has any justification, but--because of the harmony of the spheres and all this sort of thing. So I threw that in. Well, anyway, it ends on July 20, 1969. And now I'm working on a new edition which will bring it up to date--1977, 1978. I'm working on it constantly. The utilitarian part of the book is the listing of performances. Now, this is something that every musician, every librarian, every orchestra leader . . .

BERTONNEAU: . . . all the program annotators want it.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, the program annotators and so forth, they can all use it, particularly since I put such emphasis on the accuracy of those dates. Not all of them proved accurate, mostly because of the composers' and sometimes the librarians' fault (because they could not establish the exact date), and sometimes because of my own inexperience, because I trusted too many reference books. Since then I've learned not to trust any reference book. So this is how it was.





Perhaps the most flattering review I got for it came from England, in the Musical Times. It was written by Calvocoressi, who was a polymath, knew a lot, a great linguist. And his opening sentence read like this, "Like everybody, I have been reading Nicolas Slonimsky's astounding Music Since 1900." Now, this was quite an introduction.

[laughter] And when Prokofiev was in America for the last time in 1938 and the book was just out, I gave him a copy of the book. He took it to Russia, and he said afterwards that he spent the entire trip of the crossing--of course, there were no planes then--reading my book from cover to cover. He said he was quite fascinated with it. Practically all of Prokofiev's work up to 1936 was covered in that volume, including Peter and the Wolf, and there were quotations from Prokofiev's letters to me and so forth.

BERTONNEAU: I think because there's such a close parallel in construction of them, we probably ought to talk about the Lexicon of Musical Invective, because it seems to run parallel with Music Since 1900.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, it is, because, you see, next I began discovering that critics were not too kind to those new works. And this, as you say, ran parallel with my basic purpose: to discover why styles change, and why new types of music or art or literature or whatever are at first unacceptable to the critics, or, for that matter, to the general public.



Some of the criticisms I was able to quote in Music Since 1900 in connection with the performance, particularly the performance of [Schoenberg's] Pelleas und Melisande in 1902, and it's simply extraordinary what the French critics said about it, absolutely fantastic. And then I began to consider a book which would be an outgrowth-- you're absolutely right in saying that this was a parallel-- and include not only criticisms of the twentieth century, but also criticisms of the nineteenth century. Music criticism as such did not come into existence until, I should say, 1930, 1940. Not even then. It was sporadic. But daily music criticism is no more than 150 years old, perhaps less, less than that.

Well, so you might think. . . . People ask me, "How did you proceed?" Did I start reading all newspapers? No, but I started reading all music magazines since their inception. The French magazine, Le Ménestrel, which immortalized itself by damning Wagner after the Paris performance of Tannhäuser in 1864--so I covered practically all of Le Ménestrel, just read it, year by year. Not every line--I mean, if there was an article on Gluck or Mozart, of course, I was not reading it. I was reading reviews, and reviews that I suspected would be adverse reviews. So I covered that; I covered American magazines, Musical America and Musical Courier. You see, they were bulky magazines



containing a lot of information and a lot of criticism. And then, you see, I was working in the Boston Public Library, and I discovered the archive--I mean I didn't discover it; I discovered the existence of the archive of Philip Hale.

BERTONNEAU: Who was the Boston music critic.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, the famous Boston music critic who pasted in laboriously his own reviews, which he began writing in 1890, and other reviews as well. And then the scores themselves in the Boston Public Library had reviews from all over the world pasted in because the founder of the Boston Public Library, a man named [Allen] Brown, collected these reviews during his trips abroad. And I found some write-ups of 1850, 1860--simply extraordinary what I found pasted in in those scores. And then there were all reviews of the Boston Symphony programs since its inception in 1881. That was a gold mine. And by that time I knew what to look for. I knew that Philip Hale didn't care for Brahms and then didn't care for Debussy, that he was apt to write extraordinary things about Brahms and Debussy. Then I found that there was a critic named [William Foster] Apthorp who didn't like Tchaikovsky, who said about the Pathétique Symphony that it was "the product of a syphilitic infection." [laughter] So this of course gladdened my heart. Or there was an edition called Dwight's [Journal of Music], also



published in Boston (you see, Boston was really the richest town in this respect), which damned Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto, which had its world premiere in Boston in 1875. Well, certain phrases, of course, remain in my memory; they are in the book, of course.

BERTONNEAU: You devised sort of an index, which you called an Invecticon.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, Invecticon. So in that Invecticon all those things: "Insane lunacy," and then, "see Liszt, Wagner, Debussy, Ravel," [laughter] and of course Schoenberg, all the way, Strauss, all the way down the line. But also I went back as far as Chopin and found extraordinary things published in the English papers, in which even Chopin's private life was invaded with music reviews.

BERTONNEAU: It's a little ironic that these critics are now remembered only because of their bad reviews.

SLONIMSKY: Not necessarily, but certainly Philip Hale made himself famous or infamous because of his editorial about my concerts.

BERTONNEAU: Oh, yes, this was the Philip Hale that Ives referred to as "Auntie Hale."

SLONIMSKY: Yes, Auntie Hale and so forth.

BERTONNEAU: The Lexicon of Musical Invective is also prefaced by a rather remarkable essay called "On the Non-acceptance of the Unfamiliar," the story of looking at all





these reviews.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, yes. Well, you see, this was my thesis, which was, as you correctly remarked, an outgrowth of Music Since 1900. Music Since 1900 was a history of musical styles, and then I went into the problem of reception and the nonacceptance of the unfamiliar. And this, I believe, was the secret of the thing. People are not apt to react favorably to things that are unfamiliar to them. It may concern dress or appearance or languages or lifestyle--and of course music. I'm rather proud of that essay because I was able to at least posit my main ideas, which connect up, as you correctly remarked, with the ideas of music as an art in flux.

People ask me why I don't publish a sequel to the Lexicon of Musical Invective and include recent reviews. Well, the explanation is very simple. Music critics stopped writing abusive reviews. See, they became either overcivilized or they just lost their sacred flame that animated people like [Eduard] Hanslick and others, and also even newspaper critics in New York and Boston. Critics can swallow anything. The most outrageous performances are presented on the stage, and the critic will say, "Well, it's dull. It's the same old thing over again--too long," and so forth. But no one will say, "This is a criminal offense against the use of the art," and this sort of thing,



the way they wrote in former times.

BERTONNEAU: Do you think they are afraid you might really write a sequel?

SLONIMSKY: Well, as a matter of fact, Winthrop Sargeant, the critic on The New Yorker, accused me of corrupting the morals of young composers by producing this book and by giving them an argument that maybe when their works are criticized, that the critics are just as stupid as those who damned Liszt and Wagner and Debussy and Schoenberg and Stravinsky. So that was interesting. And then the critic of the Chicago Sun-Times published a Sunday feature article entitled "Who's Afraid of Nicolas Slonimsky?" That was published because the music patron named [Paul] Fromm, who is very well known, gave a talk in Chicago to music critics and told them to beware of the fate of the music critics whose quotations are incorporated in my book. He urged them to read my essay and to examine my book very carefully as a guide. Well, naturally, the critics rebelled that "He is not going to lecture us about how we ought to write criticism." And so he published his article in which he said that Fromm tried to intimidate them by using my Lexicon of Musical Invective as a sort of a warning. And then I understand Isaac Stern recently referred to this book also as a warning and in some kind of a reception, I think for Kissinger, in Washington. So a friend of mine in Washington,



he heard it over the radio, and he said, "Well, I hope Kissinger will order his secretary to buy all available copies of the book."

Well, anyway, it became a sort of famous or infamous book or whatever. It is an amusing book, of course. I mean, sometimes I go over it, and I just can't believe it. I can't believe that all those criticisms were actually published. One of the critics [Walter Kramer], now dead, who published a denunciation of Prokofiev as a purveyor of noise when Prokofiev first appeared in New York in 1918 and declared even the Classical Symphony as "a portrayal of the sad state of affairs that reigns in Russia"--just how he could have [decided] that the Classical Symphony was offensive, I don't know--he wrote me and said he had reread his own criticisms in my own book and he simply could not understand, thirty years later, how he could have written such a thing.

BERTONNEAU: There were a couple of other retractions, weren't there? There was one critic of Schoenberg who wrote that he had completely changed his mind.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, of course, there were numerous cases. And some of the critics were embarrassed. Well, Heinrich Strobels, for instance, who was a--well, he's dead now--who was one of the greatest promoters of modern music, but when he reviewed my Berlin concerts in 1932, he used the worst



invectives possible against those composers. And when a mutual friend showed my book to him and the text in German (you see, all quotations are, as you know, in the original language with translations) Strobél could only laugh and just say nothing.

Well, so, as you see, I always did things that somehow were antagonistic or polemical or against the grain or something. But I suppose it was in my genes--[laughter] not the blue jeans that I wear occasionally myself, but in my genetic material. There is no other explanation.

BERTONNEAU: Are you a kind of a gadfly then?

SLONIMSKY: Well, maybe. But still the books that I compile have some factual information, so that. . . .

BERTONNEAU: Currently, the fact that Music Since 1900 and the Lexicon of Musical Invective are still in print is. . . .

SLONIMSKY: Oh, yes, of course, they will never go out of print.

BERTONNEAU: Well, we got a little bit ahead of the story chronologically, and we should go back to the 1930s and talk about your second book and the trip that led up to it which you made to South America to explore the music there.

SLONIMSKY: Well, let's talk about South America. Now, in my conducting experience, I was already in touch--not with South America, but I visited Havana, and I conducted concerts there. I conducted works by Cuban composers and some





South American composers and Chávez of Mexico and so forth. So I was already in touch with Latin America. And then I realized that there was no book on Latin American music, any kind of book, that those composers--of course, Villa-Lobos occasionally made it into the dictionary, but the other composers were completely unknown. And with my developing sense of completeness, I decided to arrange for a grand tour and visit as many of the twenty Latin American republics as possible, including places like El Salvador and Panama, where there wasn't much music. Coincidentally, I was approached by the music director of the Fleisher collection of orchestral scores in Philadelphia [Franklin Price]. [Edwin] Fleisher was a very rich man who was interested in collecting scores for performance. He gave money to have parts copied. Well, I met Fleisher in Philadelphia, and he said that he would be willing to sponsor my tour in South America and provide enough money for expenses.



TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE TWO

MARCH 19, 1977 and MARCH 23, 1977

BERTONNEAU: Fleisher, I think is what we were talking about.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, Fleisher, rich man, Philadelphia, who organized the Fleisher collection of orchestral scores. He financed my trip to South America. I went there on the eve of the Second World War. I started in 1941--of course, America was not in the war as yet in August 1941--and went first to Brazil and then to Argentina, Chile, Peru, Colombia, and all of Central America. I had visited the island of Cuba and other islands before. Of course, Brazil and Argentina provided the richest harvest for my investigations. Again I found the same situation as working on Music Since 1900: difficulty of obtaining information and scarcity of composers. Now, Brazil--of course, I knew Villa-Lobos (Villa-Lobos was the greatest), and I also knew Oscar Lorenzo Fernandez, a remarkable composer (of course both are dead now), and several other Brazilian composers. And I was absolutely fascinated by the spirit of Brazilian music.

Villa-Lobos, of course, was a great composer, no question about it. He also told me fantastic stories about his life. He was great on vital fiction; he would start talking about his life, and then he would obviously begin inventing things that simply never happened, or things that couldn't have happened. My difficulty with him was that he



had a tremendous catalog of works, without notations and so forth, but he didn't have the scores. And when I asked him for the scores, he said that his publisher in Sao Paulo had the scores. So I went to Sao Paulo and saw his publisher, Ricordi. He showed me a whole tray of cards, and I said, "Where are the scores?" He said, "The scores, no, Maestro has them." And finally I began to realize that those scores were conceptual scores; I mean, they were scores that were in Villa-Lobos's mind, but they didn't exist. That created quite a difficulty, because in the meantime I had enumerated his compositions for my various dictionaries. At that time I was already beginning to be connected with dictionaries and encyclopedias, and I simply could not trust what Villa-Lobos had to tell me. But he was a very amusing person. Of course, he was a sort of a genius--not in the sense that Charles Ives was a genius, because Charles Ives was a profound thinker; Villa-Lobos was an experimenter and a doer, a person who just stormed all over Brazil inventing things, organizing tremendous festivals and conducting choruses of thousands of children and stuff like that. A very interesting person. He also told me stories that I had to verify, and I found that they were inventions, but very amusing inventions.

For instance, in one of his pieces called Bachianas Brasileiras, also a very interesting combination, Brazilian



pieces in the manner of Bach, he used Bach's counterpoint in his pieces which were entirely Brazilian. There is a persistent high pedal point on B-flat, and he told me that this B-flat represented the cry of the jungle bird araponga, which is always on B-flat. So I went to bird shops and I asked for an araponga and was given a stuffed bird. So I said, "I'm not interested. I want a live araponga." They said, "Oh, a live araponga. You have to go into the jungle." So I was not going into the jungle, because they warned me of all kinds of bugs that can lay eggs under your skin, [laughter] and the only way to take them out was to take kerosene baths, and this was not my idea of entertainment. So I returned to Villa-Lobos, who I saw nearly every day, and I asked him why that B-flat. So he said, "Just a moment," and he called in his secretary, and he asked her-- in Portuguese, of course, but I could understand Portuguese (I spoke French to him, but by that time I could make my way through Portuguese)--he said, "What is the pitch of araponga?" She said B-flat. So he looked and he said, "See?" So I said, "Well, it's very remarkable." And then one of his pupils passed by, and he said, "Oh, come here." "Tell me what's the note that the araponga sings?" He said B-flat. So, the more testimony he collected, the less I could believe him. [laughter] But it was terribly amusing. So to this day I don't know whether the araponga





actually sings B-flat or not. But the experience was hilarious. And then, of course, there was a lot of music by Villa-Lobos which was simply extraordinary.

I happened to be in Brazil during the Mardi Gras festival at Rio de Janeiro, and that was a tremendous experience. I also picked up a song which I liked very much, which sounded like a European song, not like a Brazilian song. The words, which I translated from Portuguese, ran like this: "My toy balloon, my toy balloon, it falls into the sand/ Do not fall, do not fall into the sand/ Better fall into my hand." And the origin of the words and the custom was in the game that young people played sending hot air balloons. The idea was that if the balloon would land within reach of the person who had sent it, that this particular person would get married in the carnival year, if not, that he or she would have to wait another year. So I composed a set of variations on this which I called My Toy Balloon, Variations [on a Brazilian Tune], first for piano, and then I orchestrated it. And in the orchestra I included 100 toy balloons, naturally to be perforated in the final fortissimo. So this is the only orchestral score that has balloons in orchestration. That piece was rather successful. It was played by all major orchestras--I mean, not in the regular series, of course, but either at children's concerts or young people's concerts, or summer concerts. Arthur



Fiedler gave the first performance of it in the summer of 1942. And then there were numerous other performances, and the score is published and parts are available.

BERTONNEAU: All you need is the balloons.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, the balloons. When the assistant conductor of the Philadelphia orchestra conducted in Philadelphia, there was trouble, because the balloons were attached to the desks of the musicians, and the musicians themselves had to explode them at the end. But this is known as doubling, you see, and now if you double on another instrument, you have to be paid extra. So there was some negotiations about it with the union, and finally they graciously agreed to waive their fees. Otherwise, it would have been quite a problem, because those things--you know, at union rates, those balloons would have cost hundreds of dollars to the orchestra.

Well, so I also wrote a Brazilian type of piece which I called "Modinha Russo-Brasileira." Modinha is a type of Brazilian or Portuguese song, and I called it "Russo-Brasileira" because, most curiously, some Brazilian ballads sound, at least to me, like Russian gypsy songs. So I decided to combine elements of Russian gypsy songs with elements of [Brazilian] folk songs, and I wrote this piece. Again I hoped that it would take on its own and perhaps bring me riches that I still am able to grasp. [laughter]



Well, I recorded this piece by myself and with a singer and so forth, but it never became any kind of best seller. Of course, it can still; I mean, all that has to happen is if some movie director would hear this tune and decide to use it as a theme for a movie, and then my career would be crowned, at last.

BERTONNEAU: Well, some other things came out of your South American trip, too--not only the book, but a series of recordings of South American chamber music.

SLONIMSKY: That's right.

BERTONNEAU: And this was with the Columbia studios.

SLONIMSKY: With Columbia. Yes, I induced the Columbia people to let me record a group of South American, Central American compositions. So that was I believe the first recording of an album of Latin American. . . . [Phone rings; tape recorder turned off. There follows a five-minute section of tape which is badly obstructed by static. What follows is a rough transcription of its contents.] . . . South American chamber music, this was the recording by Columbia. This was the old type of recording, before long-playing, back in 1942. Nevertheless, it served its purpose because it represented several types of Latin American music, Brazilian, Peruvian, and Panamanian. . . . The selection, I must say, was not too successful. For one thing I didn't have a large ensemble or real orchestra. Still that album was some kind of a



landmark.

Now my book on Latin America [Music of Latin America] is, of course, out-of-date. I published it in 1945, and there's been so much Latin American music since. And many Latin American composers have now adopted an international type of composition, twelve-tone and all kinds of things, with very little national, ethnic element, which they regard as not important. Consider a composer like Alberto Ginastera, now the famous Latin American composer. He was a composer with an ethnic kind of composition; now he writes extremely cosmopolitan. . . .

My book has had a curious fate. For one thing, it was the only book enumerating Latin American composers. I tried to analyze their compositions, and I also analyzed Latin American folk music of different countries. Well, I have numerous critics who thought that it was more of a catalog than serious study. I disagree. I think it said something that had to be said. And of course I used my various types of practical analysis. I also attempted to establish the density of composers per square kilometers. . . . [laughter] Well, let's say the most dense country was Brazil, and the most thinly populated country was Bolivia. There were so many composers per square kilometer, and in some countries there was just one composer. Well, of course, I did it for fun, and then I had a formula to explain why I included





some composers and not others. In my questionnaire I asked them questions about style. Three or four years ago, the book was let out of print. But the publishers sold it to a reprint house, so the book is back in print. I wrote a rather lengthy note explaining why I didn't keep it up-to-date. I had no time, and I had no desire to do so.

MARCH 23, 1977

BERTONNEAU: Before we talk about your association with the cultural exchange programs between the United States and the Soviet Union in the late 1950s and the early sixties, I'd like to talk a little bit first about the journey you made to the Soviet Union in 1935, which was, I think, the first time you had been back since leaving in the early twenties. Could you tell us how that came about and what the purposes of the visit were?

SLONIMSKY: That particular visit came about simply because the Soviets opened their country to foreign tourists, and I was, of course, a foreign tourist. I became an American citizen in 1931, and therefore in 1935 I could go to Russia as an American, which of course I was to all effects and purposes, except for the fact that I was born in Russia and that I spoke Russian. I received my visa without difficulties, although at that time they were very suspicious of naturalized



Americans who were born in Russia, mainly because most of them, of course, knew Russia and spoke the language and could possibly write unfavorably about it. So they were rather touchy. But my position was perhaps more favorable than most because I expressed deep interest in Soviet music, I corresponded with Soviet musicians, I was collecting material for articles on Soviet composers, I was a contributor to the Slavonic [and East European] Review, which was not exactly pro-Soviet, but at least it didn't regard the Soviets as bloodthirsty usurpers. Anyway, I was persona grata in Russia at this time despite my Russian origin. I have to say "despite" because most Russians at that time were violently anti-Soviet, because most of them were refugees from Russia. In a way, I was in the same capacity, but I was deeply interested in what was going on.

So I received my visa, and I departed on boat--of course, no planes in those times to Russia. I took the Soviet boat from London to Leningrad and then traveled to Moscow. Well, 1935 was only fifteen years away from my time of departure, so I found that the link was very easy to establish. Most of my family were still living, and I was able to stay with them and enjoy a feeling of family contacts. I was able to meet Shostakovitch and other musicians of that time. I went back to my alma mater, the conservatory, and met with my former teachers. I was a



little bit struck by the shabbiness of the place, because at that time the entire city was in disrepair, and it was very much like old Russia. For instance, there were practically no taxis, just horsedrawn carriages, and it took me back to my childhood.

But my greatest interest was in meeting musicians and examining their compositions, and so forth. So with Shostakovitch I had several meetings. He let me examine his early scores, his opera The Nose, which was later criticized as being too surrealistic and too modernistic.

BERTONNEAU: Well, you arrived at a kind of interesting time, because it was still a year or two before the artistic mentors of the Communist party made certain charges against some of the prominent musicians and against other artists as well.

SLONIMSKY: Well, you're very well informed. It's true that in 1936 there appeared in Pravda a devastating article against Shostakovitch for making noise instead of writing music, in reference to his second opera, Lady Macbeth of the District of Mtzensk, a rather complicated title. The opera was based on a nineteenth-century story, and in fact when Shostakovitch wrote it, he believed that he did the right thing, that he was describing the dreadful conditions and the general decay of Russian society under the czars in the middle of the nineteenth century. But by that time the



tradition began to assert itself, and the direction of the Soviets was slowly turning towards connecting themselves with the Russian past. Not that they wanted to be known as ideological successors to the czars, but they felt that a complete condemnation of Russian society that preceded them was wrong because it was tantamount to condemnation of Russians as a nation. Well, there were those movements in the air that were very difficult to discern at first. But the main objection to this kind of music was that it was modern and that it imitated modern models of Western Europe, and later of America. But when I arrived there, it was a milieu that welcomed modern developments, and there was no opposition to experimental music or the experimental theater. I met, for instance, the famous dramatic director [Vsevolod] Meyerhold, who was still there and at the peak of his powers.

BERTONNEAU: And just a couple of years later, he disappeared completely.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. Well, as I say, you are well informed. Now he's, of course, reinstated posthumously, and now it's known that he died a natural death in eastern Russia. But he and several others who were modernists suddenly were raked over the coals and declared to be doing the wrong thing.

BERTONNEAU: Did the Russian musicians whom you met have





any inkling that this was going to come?

SLONIMSKY: No, no, they didn't as a matter of fact. And then many Russian musicians were also opposed to this kind of music. Recently, some remarkable letters were published in Russia which reflected the early days of the Revolution, and also reports of some frank opinions of people like Glazunov, the venerated director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Now, he tried awfully hard to get some help for Shostakovitch, who was very young then and actually suffered from malnutrition. In 1920 and 1921, 1922--that was already after my leaving Russia--people were simply dying of lack of food and of inability to get heat in their apartments or just maintain their physical sustenance. So Glazunov went to Maxim Gorky, who was at that time the head of the literary fund and also the artistic fund, and it was really up to him to decide who would get higher rations and so forth. So Glazunov went to him and spoke to him about Shostakovitch. He said he's a very talented youngster (at that time he was eighteen years old, 1924; seventeen, in fact, in 1923). Glazunov told Maxim Gorky that Shostakovitch simply would not survive unless he were given a higher ration, a so-called academic ration. And Maxim Gorky, according to a report by a Soviet journalist at that time, which seems entirely plausible, Maxim Gorky asked Glazunov, "Do you know his music?" So he said, "Yes,



I know his music." So he said, "Do you like it?" Glazunov said, "No, I don't like it at all. To me this kind of writing is detestable." He used the word detestable. So Maxim Gorky said, "Then, why are you coming to me to try and preserve this kind of music?" So he said, "I am trying to preserve young Shostakovitch, young Mityan" (Dmitri Shostakovitch) "because he's extremely talented, and the kind of music he writes belongs to the future, of which I am no judge." And so Maxim Gorky recommended giving that higher ration, and Shostakovitch survived. A very dramatic dialogue. Also highly dramatic letters which Glazunov and others sent to the commissar of education, [Anatoli] Lunacharski, also for the same purpose, saying in plain fact that Shostakovitch would not survive unless he would be given "a little butter." [laughter] Those letters read like letters out of a mad novel by Dostoyevsky or somebody like that, that a famous composer would have to write letters asking not for money, not for any particular privileges, but for bread and, if possible, a little butter and sugar, which are essential for Shostakovitch's survival.

Now, those letters were published only recently, and of course when I arrived there the situation was completely settled. There wasn't any question of lack of food. Food was still scarce, and there was some difficulties, but



there was, for instance, a special store for foreigners, who used foreign currency, which the Soviets needed very badly. So I was able to go to that store and buy all kinds of goodies that were not generally available. But, anyway, there were no such difficulties as that. And I still had my two brothers living, both novelists, who were earning very well in rubles, of course. But at the same time they didn't have pens that wrote well or pencils or paper. So when I brought some paper on which they could write, it was an event in their lives. See, it was a very curious, curious time.

However, I met all young composers whom I wanted to meet. And of course they knew that I was writing about them and I was collecting material about composers who at that time were not known at all. And to them, as I realized later, someone coming from America and wanting to write about them and put their names in a dictionary--that was something very exciting. To me, it was merely a desire to obtain information; but to them it was more than that. And then, much later, I learned that the fact that I inserted the names of about 105 Soviet composers in the first edition of [Oscar] Thompson's International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians, which was published in 1938, and of which I was a contributor--and those names were completely new for the outside world--this counted very favorably for me. Which I



didn't know at the time because I had an attitude that, well, just a dictionary notice. But no, one of the top musicologists, when I visited Russia again, could even name the number of Soviet composers whose biographies I used. So this was Russia in 1935. A little bit embarrassing, all this business, because of course I had to be careful not to talk politics, and there was still a feeling of insecurity.

BERTONNEAU: Who were, besides Shostakovitch, some of the composers and musicians you talked with?

SLONIMSKY: Well, at that time, there was Kabalevsky, there was [Yuri] Shaporin (who is not well known here), and there were several others who were even less known. But I collected them just like some kinds of specimens of new art. Now, you must realize that Soviet composers, although they were the citizens of the most advanced country politically (at least at that time, it seemed so; well, anyway, the only socialist country in the world), their actual composition was in the tradition of the old century. For instance, my own teachers whom I met--Maximilian Steinberg, the son-in-law of Rimsky-Korsakov, he continued to write music in the vein that Rimsky-Korsakov bequeathed to him, with some impressionistic touches, but I mean nothing like Shostakovitch's kinetic drive and no unresolved dissonances or anything of this sort. And when I sent him from America some of my early songs, my songs to Oscar Wilde's words which I composed in





the 1920s, he wrote me at once and said he was so glad to see that I didn't go all the way towards modernism (at that time, extreme modernism was Prokofiev and Shostakovitch) and that I still kept a link with the past. So this was the situation.

Now, the war came, as you know, in 1941--war came to Russia in 1941. But in 1939 already the situation was very tense because of that infamous pact that Stalin concluded with Hitler. Well, I don't want to get into politics, but various people explained that it was necessary in order to prepare Russia. Of course, Russia was still unprepared in 1941 when the attack came. But after that there was a great deal of solidarity between Russia and the West. The Russians had a terrible time. I didn't even know whether my brothers and their families were still living in Russia. I had no means of knowing. There was no communication whatsoever. And the famine and the disease were even worse than the war itself. So that's 1941 up to 1945.

And then in 1948, as you know, another blow came against modernism. This time Prokofiev and Shostakovitch and Miaskovsky and practically everybody were attacked as purveyors of musical modernism, and deliberate and demeaning imitation of the West--that was another thing. So Soviet composers were called to order, so to say, and that was a very dangerous period. The same happened to writers and



poets and so forth, including my brother, even though he was very loyal, and he wrote--anyway he was not inclined towards extreme modernism in his writing (he was a novelist). But even he was attacked, mainly because he edited a journal in which he published works by the poetess [Anna] Akhmatova, the humorist Zoshchenko, and others who at that time were proscribed. So it was a difficult situation after 1945, after the war. And then of course the cold war began, and my correspondence with Russia just ceased, including [that with] my brothers, because I realized it would be simply dangerous to write to my brothers when Stalin was still very much in action. In fact, I didn't hear from my brothers until two years after Stalin's death. Because even when Stalin died in 1953, there was still a fear that something could happen. And in those times in Russia nobody knew really what could happen because they didn't know really which way to turn. Something that seemed to be very, very correct--for instance, the condemnation of nineteenth-century Russia--all of a sudden it turned out to be wrong because by that time the tendency was towards glorifying patriotism, and all of a sudden that was the situation. It's a very complex period and would take me very long to go over it.

BERTONNEAU: I want to ask you one question. During the period of the first half of the 1950s, certainly, and the



second half, too, things got pretty crazy in this country. Did your association with Soviet composers bear on the way you were regarded?

SLONIMSKY: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Well, as you say, the situation was pretty crazy in this country, too. Now, of course, I wasn't involved politically and I certainly was never, never a member of the Communist party or anything resembling that. But there was a lot of trouble. As you rightly surmised, the very fact that I was closely associated with Soviet music and I gave lectures on Soviet music and published articles and so forth apparently put me on the spot, because I found out later that a dossier on me existed. Recently, I reminisced about this time with Aaron Copland who was, of course, very seriously attacked and actually summoned before [Joseph] McCarthy himself. You know, I wasn't; I was just attacked on the fringe by lesser people. So Aaron Copland said to me, "Yes, we can laugh now, but it wasn't so funny then." And this was the situation--I mean, in this country. Of course, we can't compare it with the situation in Russia, because, after all, in this country we could denounce McCarthy; we could denounce even the president of the republic. We could march; we could do anything. Of course, then there would be some subtle things like losing a job and so forth. But I was not employed by the government, and I was not employed by any corporation or any



sensitive thing. I was writing newspapers and teaching in various colleges. And it must be said for the academic world, and particularly for the world of journalism, that they stood absolutely firm against those attacks. It was different, unfortunately, in Hollywood, I don't have to tell you, and in the theater somewhere. But I was not connected with Hollywood and the theater. I was writing my articles in newspapers, and they were not to be intimidated by any wild ravings of McCarthy and their cohorts.

Still, things began to happen. Well, to cite one particular episode, I had a visit from the FBI. I didn't know that they were FBI. Two young gentlemen, very well groomed and extremely polite, they paid me a call one morning, and they asked me whether I was Nicolas Slonimsky. I said I was. They wanted to talk to me. And they made that movielike gesture of turning over their label and exhibiting their FBI credentials. [laughter] Well, I was amused, because I am a great movie buff, and to me it just looked like a movie. So they asked me whether they might come in. "Sure." They came in. So I asked them what I. . . . So one of them explained that they wanted to find out the extent of Communist propaganda, particularly in recruiting of Americans, liberal Americans into the Communist party. And they asked me that famous question, "Are you now or have you ever been. . . ?"





TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE

MARCH 23, 1977

BERTONNEAU: The FBI men have just asked you if you were or ever had been a member of the Communist party.

SLONIMSKY: So I answered this question with some vehemence. I said that I never belonged to the Communist party and I wouldn't belong to any religious organization--that was my way of defining the Communist party (it has a rigid dogma)--because I was a free-thinking individual. Then the next question was very silly. One of them asked me whether Nicolas Slonimsky was my real name or an assumed name.

[laughter] My answer was obvious. I said no person in his right mind would take a name like Nicolas Slonimsky which nobody could pronounce. So he smiled and nodded and explained that they had to ask all those questions. Then they asked me whether I knew a certain person (they named him) in Boston; so I said no, I did not know him. They said, "Are you sure that you didn't meet him someplace?" I said, "I can't be sure of not having met somebody."

[laughter] "How can I guarantee that I haven't met somebody? I don't remember the name, and I cannot identify him." So he said, "Well, he's a recruiting officer for the Communist party in Boston." So I said, "That's very exciting, but nobody ever tried to recruit me into the Communist party. He would have failed anyway." [laughter]



And so it went. And they always told me that I didn't have to answer those questions. I said, "I'll answer every single question. Why shouldn't I?" They asked me whether I believed in the superiority of communism. So I said, "What is going on under Stalin is not communism; it's slaughter under the cover of a scientific theory." I said, "I might be sympathetic to the ideal of communism, actually as propagated by Jesus Christ or something like that, but not the kind of communism that exists in Russia." So that passed very well.

And then they began asking me specific questions. Was I a member of the Council of American-Soviet Friendship? I said I definitely was during the entire war and still continued that membership. One of them asked me when I appeared for the last time under the auspices of this organization. So I said it must have been in the spring of 1948, because I spoke about this decree concerning composers and literary people and so forth. I said of course I spoke violently against the nature of that decree, and I said that the organization--that is, the American-Soviet Friendship Council--didn't censor me in any way, that I was free to talk apart. He said, "Do you remember when?" So I said, "It must have been after February 1948 because the Soviet decree was issued in February of 1948. Probably in April." One of them smiled and said, without looking up anything,



"Yes, April 8." So I said to him that I was really astounded because it wasn't something that was announced in the newspapers, and it really required inside knowledge. The next question was whether I knew that the Progressive Bookshop, which was the place where I gave my little talk, whether I knew that it was the gathering place of the Communist party. So I said, "No, I did not examine the premises," [laughter] "and I don't know who was in the building before me. I was concerned with my talk about the situation with Soviet music, and that was all." All right, that passed. Then one of them was interested in a drawing of my daughter as a child, which was on the wall. He said, "It's a very nice drawing. Is that Electra?" (That was the name of my daughter.) I said, "Yes, it is Electra." And then I said--I mean, my goodness, they must have really done some homework, because this sort of thing required considerable investigation.

Well, so we had this kind of conversation for about two hours, and then they left. Of course, I felt exhilarated because of this encounter, and then I always liked to talk and expound my ideas about liberty and so forth. I told them that I was, of course, opposed to Stalin's communism, but I was also opposed to the methods of McCarthy, and one of them immediately said, "We have nothing to do with the McCarthy committee." I said, "The McCarthy committee is



almost as bad as Stalin's henchmen. Of course, I realize that there is a difference, that under Stalin you can suddenly be arrested or sent to Siberia. Well, I must say that I have no such fears. But nevertheless it's unpleasant to be exposed to this kind of interrogations."

Well, this was only a prelude. Then in 1951 I was a member of the jury of some kind of an international music contest in Pittsburgh. I went there, and I was a member of the jury--everything seemed to be perfectly all right--and I returned to Boston. While in Pittsburgh, I made arrangements to appear at the Pennsylvania College for Women with a lecture. Then something very strange happened. A friend of mine called me up from Pittsburgh and asked me whether there was any truth in the report that I was a Communist. So I said, "This is a lot of baloney. Where did you get the idea?" He said, "Well, there was a notice in the Pittsburgh papers by a clarinet player who knew [you] in Boston, and his impression was that [you were] working for communism, or something like that." So I said, "Well, this is very strange, and it is perfectly preposterous. Why should I account to a clarinet player who says such things? Let him say anything he wants." But then he told me that it was not so simple. He was also connected with the Pennsylvania College, and he said that the Pennsylvania College for Women decided to cancel my lecture. See, just on the supposition





or the mere accusation on the part of that clarinet player that I was somehow connected with the communist movement. Then I realized that it wasn't so simple. Of course, it wasn't absolutely vital for me to have that engagement. But then I said to myself, "My God, maybe I'll start losing other engagements in a mysterious way." And I realized that there were other musicians who were liberal and who, even though they had never been to Russia or never had any connection with the Russians, began to be attacked. Well, Aaron Copland was one. And particularly Wallingford Riegger, who was supposed to come to Boston and receive an honorary degree from Boston University and a Phi Beta Kappa from the same university--he was summoned before the Un-American Committee--I call it "Un-American," but anyway, Committee for Un-American Activities--in New York, and he was asked whether he was a recruiting officer for the Communist party for a region in New York City. And he gave them quite a lecture. He said, "Look, my ancestors, my great-grandfather came to this country and went to Kansas, which was then territory, and worked on the prairie. I am an American of greater antecedents than you are." (It so happened that all those members of the committee all bore central European names; that was a very peculiar feature.) Well, anyway, but the university canceled his honorary degree. Which was an outrage. This was the first time and possibly the only



instance when a university knuckled under the attack of those self-appointed committees, even though obviously Riegger was not guilty of anything. And I was even less guilty of anything. The situation became a little bit unpleasant.

Then I had a call from the Christian Science Monitor (I was contributor to the Christian Science Monitor). They had an inquiry from the music editor of the Pittsburgh Gazette, I think. They were interested to know whether I was a contributor to The New Masses, whether I contributed articles on Soviet music to The New Masses, which was supposed to be a front publication. Well, that was really going too far. So the editor of the Christian Science Monitor just wanted to know whether it was so; he was asking factual information. That was quite proper that he should have inquired. So I explained that it was true that an article that I published in the Christian Science Monitor was reprinted with some changes in The New Masses.

In the meantime I received a complete text of the speech delivered by that clarinet player, whose name I forgot, before the American Legion in Pittsburgh. And the subject was me. [laughter] I was at first flattered, then bewildered, then indignant. And among points of indictment of me was, of course, first that I was born in Russia; then that I played Soviet music at a reception for the Red Dean



of Canterbury, I mean, the [Archbishop] of Canterbury of England [Geoffrey Francis Fisher]. The highest clerical position in the Anglican Church was regarded, was called "Red Archbishop" (or whatever, dean) "of Canterbury" because he thought we ought to continue friendly relations with Russia, since we were allies and since it was admitted that Russia played a very important role in the victory. So he was the "Red Dean of Canterbury." Now, it's true that I remember that I was supposed to play some Shostakovitch and Prokofiev music for his reception. But he never arrived because that was during the war and he couldn't make it. So I played the music. It was announced as his reception but it just didn't happen.

Then there was the problem about The New Masses. The same clarinet player said that he had documentary evidence that I was in communication with The New Masses. Of course, The New Masses wasn't even a communist newspaper, but it was supposed to be "front." I mean, anything could be "front," including the Christian Science Monitor, presumably. So then again I had a phone call from Pittsburgh--for some reason it was initiated in Pittsburgh and not in New York--asking me about that article. So I investigated further. I dug into my files, and I found that I did send musical examples from Shostakovitch's Seventh Symphony, which was new at that time--that was the famous Leningrad Symphony--



that I sent musical examples to The New Masses for reproduction in my article, which was essentially an article that I published in the Christian Science Monitor about Soviet music. Those musical examples, with my article, were published in The New Masses, in I think December 1942, when Russia was our great ally and was glorified for its defense of Stalingrad and so forth. But the very fact that I sent those musical examples to The New Masses, established the fact that I was in postal communication with The New Masses--horrors!

It's very difficult to understand all this now, but at the time it began to feel uncomfortable, even though I was not in government employ, and I could not be boycotted or blacklisted or anything else that happened to people in Hollywood. I really was not in any danger of being deprived of my livelihood, except a few engagements that I might have lost. One engagement was definitely canceled and the reason given (that was the Pennsylvania College for Women); but I didn't know how many engagements that I might have gotten that were canceled. This was the extent to which I became involved in this business.

At the same time, I published an article in the Journal of the American Musicological Society in which I denounced the Soviets for their attack on modern composers, particularly Prokofiev and Shostakovitch. That was in 1949. And a strange





thing happened: I suddenly lost my privileged position with the Soviet information agencies. While I was in the privileged position, they were glad to give information to whoever was interested. There was at that time a library of Soviet publications in New York, attached to the Amtorg office, and I used to go there. The librarian always supplied me with their publications--I mean, nothing secret, but just their musical publications. And in 1949, I went to the same library--it was not much of a library, but just a suite of rooms in the upper story--and the librarian said that they didn't have any publications. So I said, "Well, I know that you have the Soviet music magazine." So he said, "Well, you know, we do not regard you as friendly." He said, "You are Mr. Slonimsky. You published an article in the Journal of the American Musicological Society, and you criticized very severely our policy in music." So I said, "This is very strange. I'm not asking you for anything special. I want to read published magazines, which is your duty as a librarian to let me have." So he said, "No, we do not want unfriendly writers to have the privilege of examining these publications." Of course, at that time it was still very hard to get publications directly from Russia.

So I was sort of shot on both sides, the FBI and this crazy clarinet player. . . . [laughter] (I say "crazy" because eventually he did wind up in a mental hospital and



finally died of delirium tremens, very much like McCarthy, who also died of liver ailment induced by drinking. At least according to reports, McCarthy also was in an abnormal mental state before he died. And so this happened to this guy.) Anyway, it was very unpleasant.

I certainly regretted this opportunity to communicate with my Russian friends. And still I had no communications with my relatives in Russia. Very few people were going to Russia--that was in 1951, 1952, and by 1953 Stalin was still there. It was only in 1955, two years after Stalin's death, that I received my first letter from my brother [Alexander] in Russia asking me what the situation was. That was the first letter I had in five or six years. I had members of my family in Paris and New York (by that time they were dead), and I learned that other members of my family died in Russia. Fortunately there were no tragedies, I mean, in my immediate family. But my first cousin [Vselovod Vengerov], who was originally a social democrat, was shot by Stalin, I mean, by the GPU in Russia. He was an early revolutionary who served time under the czar, so his fate was to be shot by the revolutionaries who came to power. And then about five years later, or maybe more (perhaps in 1959, after the denunciation of Stalin by Khrushchev), he was rehabilitated posthumously--I speak of my cousin. My cousin's wife [Annette] received a document saying that the execution of



her husband was unjustified. That was very great consolation for her. [laughter] So that was the situation in my family.

BERTONNEAU: There was a kind of dark period in the middle of the 1950s when there wasn't much contact at all, for various reason, between the United States and the Soviet Union. . . .

SLONIMSKY: Well, the reason is very simple. This cold war was going on on both sides. And of course I don't have to rehearse the history of the cold war for you. McCarthy was going strong on this side, and Stalin and then Stalin's immediate successors before Khrushchev were pretty tough on their side.

BERTONNEAU: But toward the end of the 1950s, it began to thaw a little bit.

SLONIMSKY: Then it became possible at least to communicate. Of course, I had to be very careful in what I was writing to Russia not to mention any names that might have been compromised politically. But still it was safe. Some people were still afraid--in fact, some people were still afraid, even when I went to Russia in 1963, which was just about the most ideal time--but the relationship was established. And since then, of course, I'm in constant communication with my Russian friends, including my nephew, who is a very important Soviet composer.

BERTONNEAU: Sergei Slonimsky.



SLONIMSKY: Sergei Slonimsky. He writes me quite freely, and he tells me of his desire to come and visit America, as he puts it, "your legendary country," and there is a great friendship and no fear of any kind of repercussions on either side. Of course, I am perfectly safe, but. . . .  
[phone rings, tape recorder turned off]

BERTONNEAU: We were talking about the cold war period and about the breakdown of relationships--not only cultural, but practically in every other sense--between the United States and the Soviet Union, or Russia, which is your home. But around the year 1958 or '59, things began to thaw out a little bit under Khrushchev, cultural missions began to be exchanged between the United States and the Soviet Union. You later went to Eastern Europe and to the Soviet Union as part of one of these American cultural missions. But in 1959 a delegation of Soviet composers came to the United States, and this included, I think, Shostakovitch, Kabalevsky, [Konstantin] Dankevitch, and Khrennikov, who was at that time the president of the composers union in the Soviet Union.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, secretary general.

BERTONNEAU: Secretary general. And you were part of an official hosting committee or something?

SLONIMSKY: Well, it was like this. I don't know how to put it, but, see, the point is that the State Department





provided interpreters who either didn't know Russian or didn't know the correspondence between the two languages. And when this group of composers arrived in New York, the NBC network programmed a two-hour session, those composers speaking to American composers. There was a group of American composers--I believe Ulysses Kay was there, and Roy Harris, and there must have been several others whose names I cannot remember right now. And this was of some interest. Previously to that, BMI [Broadcast Music, Incorporated] gave a reception for Soviet composers. Each was presented a very fine Omega watch with their names engraved on it, and a banquet was given, and then a reception. The State Department provided an interpreter, a very curious selection; it was a Russian prince, an actual prince of the blood, of a very fine old Russian family. But, of course, the Soviets didn't draw the line; they didn't care. In fact, they were very liberal about it. In fact, Khrushchev had another prince as his interpreter in Paris several years before, and they seemed to be perfectly happy together. Because obviously there was no civil war waged between them at that time. But that particular prince who was interpreting for the State Department--of course he was a Russian (he knew Russian very well) but his English was shaky, and the worst of it was that he did not feel the nuances between the Russian expressions and the English expressions. So there



were some anecdotes: Shostakovitch was asked whether he could come to a party the next day, and he said, in Russian--he tried to learn English, but he never could, so he spoke exclusively Russian--and he said, "I can't, I'm going to Madame Butterfly." So the translator translates, "Mr. Shostakovitch is very sorry, but tomorrow night he is visiting Mrs. Butterfly." [laughter] Which is something. Now, after this, gradually they decided to get me to translate for them. At least I knew that he was not going to see Mrs. Butterfly; he was going to the opera. Then a few days later I was also summoned to translate on the network. In fact, I got quite an accolade by Howard Taubman in the New York Times, for my translating expertise.

BERTONNEAU: Was this the occasion when you moderated a "Face the Nation" program?

SLONIMSKY: Well, this wasn't a network program; it was a radio program. It wasn't a television program; it was a radio program for two hours. And I was not a moderator; I was just the translator. But, of course, in fact I was moderating it because I had to direct them when to speak. Well, that was a very interesting encounter. And a few days later they came to Boston. Aaron Copland was on the American side, and I was a translator, a moderator or whatever, sort of a link between them. There was an official translator from the United Nations who was a little better



than the State Department translators, but for musical discussion obviously I had to step in. That was a video tape. Naturally such encounters were very useful. The Soviet composers welcomed them, and the American composers of course welcomed them. But it didn't lead to any important developments. Their works were performed by the major symphony orchestras, and the American public became acquainted with customs that were a little strange to them, for instance, their applauding the audience back when the audience applauded them. Also the spirit of solidarity that was very strong--they wouldn't do anything if the invitation were to be extended only to, let's say, Shostakovitch and Kabalevsky, the most famous members of the delegation.

BERTONNEAU: Is this what led to that flap involving-- correct me if I'm wrong, but an invitation was extended just to Shostakovitch, or something like that, by NBC, and then they refused, and the radio program which you translated for was the outcome of that incident.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. Well, that was on the air. That was perfectly all right. But then there had been an invitation for a television program, I believe that was, and then of course automatically they all had to be invited or none. But in my case that was on the radio, so the time wasn't so costly. And it was the same with symphony orchestras; orchestras had to play works by all of them or none. And



some of those works were not exactly great. So there was some criticism on the part of American music critics, that they had to swallow the good with the bad.

BERTONNEAU: Now, I'm interested in how the trip you undertook with State Department sponsorship three years later came about.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, that's true. Then, by that time, the atmosphere completely changed. There was no more any suspicion of me having played Soviet music during the war, or even having sent some musical examples from Shostakovitch's Seventh Symphony to The New Masses, or to participate in meetings of the Council for American-Soviet Friendship--because everybody did that; that was during the war. I was friendly with several members of the musical jury for the State Department. Now, the State Department by that time started the office for cultural relations, not only with the Soviet Union but with the world at large, and they had considerable money. The first year they had \$2 1/2 million to play with. And it went down and went down, and finally there was very little. So I was at first merely a member. Other members were the then-director of the music division of the Library of Congress (his name was [Harold] Spivacke). Then there were temporary guests. Howard Hanson was there for a time; David Mannes was the chairman of the group for a while before he





died. And then there were others: Arthur Loesser, the pianist. . . . People were recruited, you know, one after another, according to what they did. And then I was invited. I don't know who was instrumental in suggesting my name, but obviously, since I knew Russia and since I was friendly with the Russians, so I was asked to join the committee. And gladly I joined them; I became a member of that committee and exercised whatever power of opinion I could in selecting groups for visiting not only Russia but Africa or Asia. This was done in a very grand plan. Well, then I knew that Howard Hanson went to Russia and obtained a very great success as the conductor of the Rochester group of the Eastman School of Music, with their very able orchestra. And many others went.

I had an idea that perhaps I could go, too. At first there was this obstacle that members of the committee were not supposed to be also the emissaries, but then apparently this was overcome. Well, anyway, I applied, and in a few months I received a favorable answer from the State Department, and they were to take care of the arrangements. At first it was with Russia only. Then I tried to add several other countries to it, and it proved to be rather easy, operating from the embassy in Moscow, for instance, to get an extension of my travels. The main problem was, of course, money, and also the sponsorship of the American



embassies in all those countries.

BERTONNEAU: Let me just ask you one question before you go on. Was the purpose of these tours to inform the people of these countries about American music?

SLONIMSKY: That's correct. In fact, this was the essence of cultural exchange. We were taking American music, an exhibition in art and literature and whatever. I was taking it for music, among others. And the State Department was able to give me funds for the purchase of musical scores by American composers. In fact, it wasn't the State Department, but it was the United States Information Agency that was in charge of this. They were also active in the same field. And I gave them a list of about 1,000 scores by American composers, including many jazz arrangements, to take with me to Moscow and also to other countries of the Eastern Bloc that I hoped to visit. Well, the United States Information Agency sent those scores by air to Moscow; and of course I didn't have to drag any of those scores with me, needless to say. But it was quite an undertaking, and it was, of course, simply amazing that they did that. So all those scores were sent to Moscow, scores by practically every important--and even some unimportant American composers, a lot of popular pieces, but mostly solid scores.

So with all this material I went to Russia in October 1963--no, I'm mistaken. In October '62, I went to Russia.



Now, this was not the best time in the relationship between [the United States] and the Soviet Union because this was the time of the Cuban missile crisis. I don't have to tell you of the circumstances, but suffice it to say that when I took the Soviet plane from London (I flew to London first, and then from London to Moscow I was on a Soviet plane), I was the only non-Russian passenger because of the situation. It so happened that I carried with me a copy of a scary novel called Fail-Safe, in which the denouement is the atom bombing of Moscow. [laughter]

BERTONNEAU: Not exactly an encouraging book to have along.

SLONIMSKY: It was very encouraging. I mean there was obviously no censorship of material I was bringing in. I must say, generally speaking, what the Russians objected to, and perhaps rightly so, was the importation of multiple copies of material printed in the Russian language for distribution among Russians, particularly if this material was, if not directly anti-Soviet, perhaps helping the religious sects in Russia or whatever. Well, anyway, I was obviously not concerned with anything like that. I was bringing music. I did take a few scores with me, as many scores as I could afford to take with me on an airplane. And to be truthful, I felt kind of shaky on that plane. Of course, there was no evidence that there was any kind of hostility. But I could not be sure that I would be met at



the Moscow airport, that I could communicate freely with my brother the novelist [Michael] (who was still living) and his son, the composer Sergei Slonimsky, and various other friends. I was just asking myself that perhaps they would be afraid to come to the airport. And this was not a cheerful thought.

So finally, late at night, there was a big sign, in Russian, "Moscow." We alighted, and I went out and there was a group of people obviously waiting for me. You know, they are very strong for the protocol, and, after all, I was sent by the State Department as an emissary to contribute to this cultural relationship. So whatever I actually was (I mean, that I was Russian born or anything) played no role whatsoever. I had the documents of the State Department. (Incidentally, of course, it's very interesting that although the State Department must have had a dossier from the FBI about my supposed red leanings, apparently it was dismissed completely as without any validity, which of course was true.) But at the airport I was met by several people, none of whom I knew. One of them introduced himself as the music critic of Pravda, and he led me to a tall young man, and he said, "This is Sergei Slonimsky, your nephew, Soviet composer." And then introduced me to him and said, "This is your uncle. . . ."





TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE TWO

MARCH 23, 1977

BERTONNEAU: You're at the airport, and you've just met your nephew, Sergei Slonimsky, the Soviet composer.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. Well, naturally this produced quite an impression on me. In fact, I was emotionally quite wrought up. But I tried to talk to him at first, in the car driving to Moscow from the airport, about musical matters; and we discussed things.

What affected me as being extremely strange was the changed melody of the Russian language. Apparently there was a difference--although I had been in Moscow in 1935, and there was no marked difference at that time, between 1935 and 1962 the language had changed. I don't mean words, but the inflection of the language. I felt as if I was speaking to Russians who were acting on the stage, because, for one thing, the cadence of the phrasing was slower, much slower than the cadence to which I was accustomed. Then there was this curious separation between the noun and the verb, which at first affected me as if it was almost artificial or deliberate. To give an illustration, there was, like this: "And tomorrow morning . . . we will be in Moscow." This kind of separation, which I associated with the plays of Chekhov as presented by the Moscow Art Theater, which affected this kind of language. There was



also a tremendous increase of the diminutive in common nouns. So they wouldn't say, "This is a very fine baby"; they would say, "This very fine . . . babykins." Everything was "kins." Of course, you know diminutives in Russia have different endings. And then I realized that everybody spoke like that and that this was the new Russian language. After a couple of days, I got accustomed to it. But for a while I felt like Van Winkle, who slept for twenty years and then returned to a country he couldn't recognize. Or perhaps like, let's say, an American who lives in England for forty years, or vice versa, an Englishman who lives in America for forty years and returns to his country and feels that the language has changed. And I don't mean just the expressions. There were several expressions that I couldn't understand at first. And I simply couldn't understand their comic paper--I couldn't understand the jokes. But this is also true about England and America. The English don't seem to understand The New Yorker, and Americans don't seem to be able to get the jokes in Punch. Still, combined with all those apprehensions about the situation in Cuba, and the constant exchange between Khrushchev and Kennedy, it was very, very strange. Well, I arrived in Moscow and, well, in a few days I realized that this was still old Russia and I could speak the language.

At first I had a guide, like a tourist guide. Then I



explained to her that I didn't need a tourist guide, and I was completely on my own. I stayed in a hotel, but I visited my older brother [Alexander], who was then living in Moscow, every day. Then my nephew, of course, was with me quite a bit of time in Moscow; then he had to return to Leningrad, which was his hometown. And then I went to Leningrad and spent several weeks there. And I went down to the Caucasus and to the Caspian Sea and, on my way there, to Kiev. So really in the few weeks I had the complete panorama of what was happening in Russia then. And since I had this very important support as an official emissary of the State Department, I could get whatever I wanted. I received an enormous amount of scores and musical publications, books. . . .

BERTONNEAU: Were you then lecturing in the Soviet Union?

SLONIMSKY: And I was also lecturing. That was another thing that was quite extraordinary: they arranged for me a number of lectures, and I must say that I never had such an audience and never had such a reception for a lecture. It was just a straight lecture with musical illustrations, and the subject was "Coexistence of Modern Music and Socialist Realism." I tried to make it quite direct, and the interest was extraordinary. Even in places like Yerevan, Armenia, I had a full house and people were standing in doorways. The director of the conservatory was there. And



the same thing in Tbilisi. And when, after a two-hour lecture, they asked me whether I had any special wishes, I said, "Yes, I want to import this audience to New York." Because their interest and their--I would say their desire for information, for something new, and their friendliness was extraordinary, much more so than I could remember from the time of my youth in Russia, where the Russians seemed to be rather rude and aloof. But here I was struck by this outpouring of friendship and this tremendous desire to learn something that they don't know. Politics were not discussed at all. Here all those tremendous events were going by-- I read the Russian papers, of course, and there were reports about the exchange of telegrams between Kennedy and Khrushchev, and the situation was still uncomfortable--but I could not see any reflection of it in personal relations. I had a strange feeling after an evening spent with the top Russian musicologist, [Grigori] Schneerson. We were drinking tea, discussing music; he had all my books (which I had sent him before); he was completely au courant of what was going on all over the world in matters musical. And we were drinking tea and talking and conversing about all kinds of matters, and I had the impression that I was back in Chekhov's Russia, that nothing had changed, that if it weren't for the newspapers, if it weren't for my knowledge that there was a revolution and that Russia suddenly emerged





as a great power (which it never was before the Revolution) and all that sort of thing, then I wouldn't have been able to tell from the evidence available from my conversation that there was any change. And by that time I got accustomed to the new melody of the language, so it didn't affect me so much, and I began talking almost the same type of lilt. I should say that it would be, well, perhaps the impression that Jimmy Carter produced at first with his kind of language, and vice versa, New York--who notices now that he speaks with any kind of southern inflection? It has been absorbed. Perhaps in the same way I felt about Russia. But there were numerous new words which I could not understand. Again, I say it would be just like moving to California and understanding the way the young people in California talk. I knew a professor at Yale University who could not understand California expressions, now universal expressions. He didn't know what "rip-off" meant; he didn't know what an "ego trip" was. He was a professor at Yale University, so he was separated from. . . .

BERTONNEAU: You said you were giving musical examples in your lectures. Were you using recordings, or were you playing the piano?

SLONIMSKY: Mostly playing the piano, but I also had a number of records, so I played works by major American composers. They were familiar with Gershwin's music, but



they knew very little of the music of such men as Walter Piston or Roy Harris and David Diamond and many others. You see, at that time the avant-garde had not yet risen to the surface, so I didn't have the extreme examples of modern music, like John Cage and so forth. Anyway, they didn't care for John Cage: this just about stopped at that level. Samuel Barber was very successful there during his own trip, and they were familiar at least with his Adagio [for Strings].

BERTONNEAU: Did you by any chance introduce them to any Ives or Cowell, or Varèse, or any of. . . ?

SLONIMSKY: Yes, of course. There was Ives, and there was Cowell; there was Varèse (of course, they regarded Varèse as a French composer). But I certainly imported a lot of Ives, and I spoke about Ives everywhere, and they were tremendously interested. At that time, 1962, they were beginning to understand the significance of Ives. There was absolutely no objection to any kind of new sounds in American music; they were tremendously interested. Ives, in fact, became quite a favorite in Russia, and on the one-hundredth anniversary of Ives, in 1974, my nephew organized a special concert of music by Ives, performed by Soviet musicians. The same, but in a lesser degree, for the music of Carl Ruggles, Wallingford Riegger, and Cowell. Not so much of Varèse, but Varèse was extremely influential in Hungary and



in Rumania and in Poland, particularly in Poland. So my Russian trip was almost like a dream. I just couldn't imagine that all this was happening. First of all, it was a tremendous emotional uplift for me, not only on account of my brother and on account of my nephew, which was of course very important, but just to feel that this was the country where I was born and yet it had changed so completely. And as I said, I was impressed by this fantastic desire to absorb culture, any kind of culture, and also knowledge of their own culture.

For instance, I went to the post office to mail two scores by Khatchaturian which he gave me as a present, two complete scores of his ballets, Gayane and Spartak (Spartacus). And Russia still has no wrapping paper. (This is one of the great lacks of socialist industry.) The rule was that you took your books or music to the post office, and they sold you wrapping paper. There was a clerk, usually a woman who actually wrapped it up, put stamps on it, usually put the prettiest stamps on it, understanding that in America, of course, there was a desire for pretty Soviet stamps. That woman, who was a postal clerk, looked at the scores and saw that it was Gayane and Spartacus by Khatchaturian, and she looked at me and said, "Do you really think that Spartacus is superior to Gayane? I still think that Gayane is the best ballet that Khatchaturian ever wrote." Now, this is



the sort of thing that is simply unimaginable anyplace else in the world. Now, I don't say the Soviet people are necessarily intellectually superior to what I know from American experience, but I can't imagine going to the post office here with the scores of, let's say [Edward] MacDowell and Howard Hanson and have the postal clerk expressing his opinion as to which score is superior to which. [laughter] And this was a typical example of what you encounter along those lines--tremendous interest in culture, and the knowledge of their own culture. For instance, sometimes I took a taxi in Moscow because I didn't want to impose, either on the American embassy or on the Union of Soviet Composers, which also invited me. See, I was doubly invited: I was the emissary of the State Department through the office of cultural exchange, and at the same time I was invited by the Union of Soviet Composers as an observer or a guest, which gave me unique opportunity actually to be present during the deliberation of the Union of Soviet Composers. I was present when they decided in favor of publishing my nephew's First Symphony. This was quite an experience--I mean, just to know what the mechanics of this selective process are. So I took a cab, and we passed by a church. And the cabdriver--I spoke Russian; I mean, I doubt whether anyone could tell that I was absent from Russia or that there was anything in my speech that





betrayed a long sojourn abroad--he said, "You know, this church, Pushkin was married in this church." Now, this is just the sort of thing that is unbelievable: a taxi driver would know in what particular church Pushkin, the Russian poet, was married 150 years or so before that. [laughter] Now, this was my strongest impression because, above all, as I told you, I'm a product of the intelligentsia, perhaps the cosmopolitan intelligentsia (because sometimes I don't believe that I am in any way connected with only one part of intelligentsia). I suppose that I'm a member of the intellectual internationale, something like that, because I feel that every intellectual, whether he be in Hungary, in Rumania, in Azerbaydzhan, or in Burma, is my kind of a person to whom I can address myself. And there was some kind of a celebration of intellectualism in Russia which was simply extraordinary. We went to a restaurant in Moscow, and I was in the company of several Soviet composers, including a composer named [Georgy] Sviridov, a name completely unknown outside of Russia, but he was very well considered, and is very well considered for his oratorios and so forth--not a very original composer. Well, we were sitting there, and somebody mentioned him, and the maitre d'hotel, the maitre d, or whoever was in that position, suddenly proclaimed, "We have a great composer among us, Comrade Sviridov." Now, that is another thing, that they all applauded. They seemed



to know who Sviridov was.

Now, one of the strangest experiences I had was the situation with Soviet scores, which were published in great quantities and almost immediately sold. This was a special case, of course, particularly as regards music. I already knew that in literature there was a similar situation--in fact, more so. For instance, my own brother told me that he couldn't give me a copy of his latest novel because he said, as he put it, "Stupidly, I didn't ask for my author's copies, and before I knew, the whole edition of 100,000 copies was sold out." And he was not a best seller in any sense. He was well known in Russia. But this sort of thing was incredible. And my other brother [Alexander], who was a specialist in literature and wrote several books on the style of Pushkin, a very specialized type of book, his book was published in 20,000 copies, and again he said that after a few months you couldn't get a copy; it was sold out. Of course, the Russian classics are practically unattainable on account of that. So I went to a music store and I asked for a copy of Sviridov's oratorio. And the sales girl just looked at me with perfect amazement. She said, "That oratorio was published two weeks ago," meaning that, of course, no copies were available. An oratorio! [laughter] I mean, after all, this is not something that you buy to sing at the breakfast table. It was quite extraordinary. And



then, of course, I realized that this was the common situation with books. Simply unobtainable. I mean, of course, you could always obtain the collected speeches of Stalin or Khrushchev or whoever was on top at that time. But classics--and in music, it was the same thing. Even popular compositions by secondary Russian composers, prerevolutionary Russian composers, also disappeared the moment they hit the store. Also Shostakovitch's Fourth Symphony, which was not published until years later because it was criticized for its modernity--well, suddenly, there was a rumor that it was published (you know, you had to be fed on rumors), and the secretary of the Union of Soviet Composers brought the score to me, and she put it on the table face down, so that nobody would see what it is. She said to me, "This is Shostakovitch's Fourth Symphony, but put it in a bag or cover it with a newspaper so that nobody will see it." So I got a copy of the Fourth Symphony of Shostakovitch. But to me it was an indication of a tremendously high intellectual level which simply could not be compared with the average intellectual level in Russia, as I knew now. Of course, even in my narrow milieu of intelligentsia, there was no such awareness of intellectual values. As to the postal clerk or the taxi driver or a waiter knowing anything about composers or writers or poets, it was completely inconceivable.



So, while I was in Russia, I was apt to be impressed by those things and even think that perhaps they did change human nature. Of course, I knew that horrible things were perpetrated. And then I had strange thoughts. I mean, they were philosophical thoughts which I could not express in Russia to anybody because they would have denied it. But I said, well, after all, there was terror in Italy during the Renaissance period--I mean, there were poisonings and killings and so forth--and yet this proved to be the greatest flowering of the arts in Europe at that time. And there were other parallels. So I didn't want to even to think in such a direction. And by that time, Stalin was completely out, I mean, a forgotten name not to be mentioned again. So this was a dark period. So I saw some kind of a renaissance. And yet there was a certain feeling that not all matters could be discussed freely. Of course, I didn't try. After all, I was in a way guest in my own country, my old country, but I was not going to start discussing matters of liberty or equal rights or whatever. I was impressed by the attainments that were among people, perhaps at the price of a great deal of suffering, but still it was amazing. It's still amazing to me. I still can't understand how they combine the two elements, submission to obvious injustice and, at the same time, a tremendous intellectual renaissance.





BERTONNEAU: How was your visit received in the other countries you visited?

SLONIMSKY: Yes. Now, from Russia, I went to Poland. Poland in a way was also my country, because my family, the roots, to use a popular expression, [laughter] were in Poland. And I had relatives, particularly my first cousin who was a famous Russian poet. Every Pole knows the name of Antoni Slonimsky, my cousin, who wrote remarkable Polish poetry and also general articles. So he met me at the airport, and I was with him all the time. He arranged for me meetings with the Polish intelligentsia. I couldn't speak Polish very well; I could understand it, could speak it--I mean it's a Slavic language, but it's quite a distance from the Russian language. You are a linguist, and you will understand that perhaps the distance may be the same as Danish and Swedish.

BERTONNEAU: Or perhaps even farther, perhaps even English and German.

SLONIMSKY: No, no, It's not that far. No, Polish--all the roots are the same. When a Pole speaks to me in Polish, I understand it. The construction, the grammar--the same. The absence of the definite or indefinite article is in all Slavic languages, with the exception of Bulgarian perhaps, but then this definite article becomes a suffix at the end of the word. Well, those things are



very interesting, of course. But, anyway, I could understand Polish. I read the newspapers with difficulty, but I could understand my cousin's poetry more or less, particularly when he read it to me and explained certain things.

I'll say just a few words about him--he's no longer living. He spent the time during the Second World War in London; he was connected with the Polish emigration in London. Then, as you know from your historical information, the Russians established their own Polish government. So my cousin was connected with the wrong kind of Poles. Nevertheless, in 1948 he decided to return to Poland because he felt that this was his country. He could write; although he was a linguist, he could write well only in the Polish language. So in 1948 he returned to Poland. And he was allowed to exist intellectually; in fact, he was even allowed to publish weekly feuilletons in a literary gazette in Warsaw until he did something that finally broke the camel's back. He published an article in praise of the Polish state radio in which he said that they have a marvelous way of dealing with children, telling fairy tales on the air. He said particularly imaginative and inventive is the daily program of fairy tales broadcast by the Polish state radio from seven to seven-thirty . . . and that is the official government information agency. In other words, by



praising the fairy tales, he equated the government information broadcasts with fairy tales for children. [laughter] Well, that terminated his literary activities, although they gave him every conceivable favor, including publications, the deluxe publication of his books--which, however, the Polish government did not put on sale. So it was one of those Orwellian situations. He was given everything. There were those magnificent volumes, but you couldn't buy them anyplace because they were forbidden because he was under this curious prohibition. That is, he was not touched; his apartment was his; he could receive money from abroad; he could correspond--there was nothing, except he was being published by the government publishing house . . . but not distributed.

BERTONNEAU: Not distributed or sold. This was some time after the artistic constraints had been taken off of Polish artists.

SLONIMSKY: Yes.

BERTONNEAU: Were the Poles receptive to the latest developments in American music?

SLONIMSKY: The Poles didn't have to be told about the new things. They at that time inaugurated the so-called Polish Autumn. And in Poland I met composers who in fact are the most progressive composers now living--[Witold] Lutoslawski in Warsaw, and then, when I went to Cracow, there



type of paper, too--quite a difference from Russia, where music is published rather shoddily on poor quality paper and not even cut properly, so that sometimes the text of the music is slightly off the margin. But not in Poland: in Poland they produced magnificent editions, including editions of old Polish music, old Polish operas and church music, all published by the state publishing house in Cracow. Poland was extraordinary to me.

Then I traveled to Rumania, Bulgaria, and then Israel, Greece, and also Czechoslovakia, and finally Germany, France, and England. All this was supported by the State Department. I forgot to mention Hungary. And funds were provided to me; the American Embassy was invariably interested. And then on my way back I went through Yugoslavia--that was another country that I covered--in other words the entire eastern part of Europe, both in the socialist bloc, so-called, and in the west. Naturally, in every country I gathered information; I was in touch with composers. In several countries they seemed to know my name, and I had no difficulties introducing myself.

BERTONNEAU: Of the countries besides Russia and Poland, which had the most impressive musical establishment?

SLONIMSKY: I should say that I was impressed by all of them in various ways.

Now, after Poland--my first stop was, of course, in





was [Krzysztof] Penderecki, who was a young person. He helped me with getting my visa fixed for a few more days; I wanted to stay longer in Poland, and he went around with me. I didn't realize that this was Penderecki who was to become so famous now. We spoke German because he spoke fluent German; he didn't speak Russian, and Polish was still difficult for me. For any prolonged, any complex conversations, I usually spoke--I gave several lectures in Poland, but I spoke French in Warsaw, answered questions in Polish by speaking in Russian; and in Poznań, I spoke in German because it was formerly a German province, so most of them spoke German fluently.

Again I traveled around in Poland giving lectures and playing, met various people and musicians of tremendous attainments. Some of them really impressed me as being great scientists of music; it was amazing how much they knew about music history. And then the publishing industry in Poland was fantastic. In Cracow they published avant-garde scores by Polish composers, some of them in several different colors--that is, notes were different colors--and engraved, beautifully engraved; they were works of art. They were, of course, very generous in letting me have all those scores, so I kept sending them back to myself, to Boston. I remember I had an impression of tremendous light, I mean, almost like the sunrays penetrating the paper, a beautiful



Austria, but Austria was within the western group--then I went to Yugoslavia. And there I met some very interesting people, and I also realized that it was culturally a very powerful country that produced a lot of modern music (I was interested mainly in modern music, of course). Again I gave a lecture, speaking either in Russian, or French, or in German. I learned Serbian, which was identical, practically, with Croatian, so I could get along in Serbia and in Croatia (which is the western part of the country). I had some difficulties in Slovenia, in Ljubljana, because the words seemed the same--I mean, they were all Slavic words--but they seemed to have different meanings. And the Yugoslavs spoke very little Russian. In fact, I was amazed that there was a certain reluctance to speak Russian, even among those who knew Russian. I was amazed that in Poland I spoke to a person who actually was educated in Russia, a person in his fifties, and I said to him, "Well, I don't have to try to converse with you in Polish or in French, because you're a Russian." "Well, do we have to speak Russian?" he said, in perfect Russian. So there was this opposition, because they were forced to learn the Russian language in those countries at first. And I don't believe this is any longer a policy of the Soviet Union in the eastern bloc. Well, as I say, I could talk for hours and hours by just enumerating what was done in those countries



that we know very little about. There was a group of very interesting composers in Yugoslavia, in Zagreb, and they are giving regular, annual festivals of modern music in a place called Dubrovnik on the Adriatic Sea.

Then Rumania--also a tremendous flowering of all kinds of composition and an abundance of talents. Even in a place like Cluj, which was the capital of Transylvania, Dracula country--I was invited to attend a conservatory lesson and then give a little talk in French, and several pupils played for me. And I tried with them some of my modern scales and explained how to play, and they seemed to be able to pick it up with no difficulty whatsoever. Natural talents--this is the way I felt in Rumania, that they were natural musicians, I mean those who studied music. Also there was something cheerful about Rumania as a country.

Bulgaria was a little bit more drab. But still there were very interesting composers, and one of them was an old friend of mine, Pantcho Vladigerov, really the only important composer in Bulgaria still living. I spent a whole day with him, and he played--he had recordings of practically all of his works (this is simply amazing), operas, ballets, symphonies, chamber music. So I spent a whole day with him, and I left at ten o'clock, just the time when a most vicious Bulgarian blizzard struck Sofia,



where I was. I was about two blocks from my hotel, and I nearly got lost. [laughter] And in Bulgaria, of course, I spoke Russian. The language is very close to Russian, and I could read Bulgarian papers with no difficulty, and certainly Bulgarian dictionaries and reference books. As in most of those countries, I was amazed by the appreciation that is given to men and women of intellectual labor. For instance, there were two biographies of Pantcho Vladigerov, and a biography of Lubomir Pipkov, a composer whose name means absolutely nothing to the outside world. And it was the same, of course, in Russia. Now there is a monograph published in Russia about my nephew, a substantial monograph of about 250 pages.





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BERTONNEAU: I think your first job as an editor of a lexicographical publication was with Oscar Thompson's new International Cyclopedia of Music . . .

SLONIMSKY: . . . and Musicians.

BERTONNEAU: And Musicians.

SLONIMSKY: That was the whole title, yes.

BERTONNEAU: And when did this begin?

SLONIMSKY: Well, that began in 1939. This was the date of the publication of the first edition. At that time, I was not the editor; I was an associate editor and a contributor. And I was able to include a number of people who were not in the dictionaries at that time, particularly 105 Soviet composers, including composers whose names had not been known, and a few feature articles on Shostakovitch, or Villa-Lobos, on Stravinsky, on Prokofiev--all those who were more or less my specialty. This was quite an experience. Perhaps it wasn't my first confrontation with a big encyclopedia, because I had examined other encyclopedias, and I, of course, had already published my Music Since 1900. And in the first edition of Music Since 1900, published in 1937, I had a special section correcting Grove's Dictionary and Riemann's dictionary and some others. Of course, Thompson's dictionary didn't exist, and Baker's Dictionary was out of



date, so I didn't bother. But I corrected encyclopedias. We produced quite an effect, because nobody had ever done anything like that--I mean, correcting others in such an ostentatious way. I took it out in the subsequent edition because it didn't seem to serve any purpose. Besides, those corrections were gradually made. So when I came to contribute to Thompson's Cyclopedia, I was already a fairly informed lexicographer. Of course, now, when I look back, I think that I was pretty naive, taking data from supposed authorities; but at least I knew already that authorities were not to be trusted, that an investigation had to be made. And, worse than that, I realized that autobiographies were not to be trusted because musicians in general like to write hagiography (that is, a description of the life of a saint) rather than straight biography. And, of course, even now I have my doubts about the value of autobiographies because there are two kinds of autobiographies that are imaginable: one is self-glorification and the other is self-deprecation. But self-deprecation, to which I am inclined, can also be a form of self-glorification. And that is the trouble. If I say that I realize that I didn't know anything, that I was ignorant, and then I display erudition and reveal facts that nobody else knew, then it turns out that I was really glorifying myself or telling a morality tale about a person starting from the bottom and then coming to the top. So it's a difficult proposition.



However, I was really not interested in myself, I must say. I was interested in correlating those contradictory dates and above all the actual dates of birth and dates of death and the places where composers were born and where they died. And then gradually I began discovering the facts of life, [laughter] began discovering things that couldn't have happened because of chronological discrepancy and so on and so forth. So this was perhaps my initiation into sort of a determined, almost desperate attempt to establish facts. Of course, there was no problem with my own articles because they concerned mostly people who were still living, and I had an excellent line of communications with Soviet Russia. In fact, as I believe I already mentioned to you, they were flattered that the editor of an American encyclopedia wanted information about them. It wasn't the case of Shostakovitch or Prokofiev--they were accustomed to this attention, particularly Prokofiev (but still he was willing to give me information which was at that time only obtainable with difficulty, exact dates and circumstances of the composition of his famous works and so on).

Perhaps the most difficult problem for me was to track down obscure musicians. See, encyclopedias, particularly biographical encyclopedias (and largely they are biographical anthologies) have to provide vital statistics. They are practically unobtainable about composers who lived centuries



ago, and they are obtainable with difficulty even about recent composers and, I should say, musicians in general, particularly singers. This was my first problem. Then there was the question of establishing the truth or the untruth of famous stories in music.

BERTONNEAU: So you had to become almost a kind of detective.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. As a matter of fact, I had to use methods that are applied in detective stories. For instance, search in cemeteries--this is the regular thing in detective stories where the person tries to assume different identities. He goes to a cemetery and looks up the registries or actually tombstones for people of his age who died in infancy. So they find a more or less suitable date, and they ask for the birth certificate--which is never denied (to my surprise, anyone can obtain such a birth certificate)--and then they declare themselves to be that particular dead person. And then they obtain a passport, and so on and so forth. It's a very familiar gimmick. Most famously it obtained in the movie The Day of the Jackal, where the killer obtained a passport exactly by this method. Well, I was not interested in any such shenanigans, [laughter] but I found it an excellent way of verifying dates. However, the dates on tombstones cannot be relied upon. This is another thing that I learned. Dates given in passports are not reliable because when you take out a passport, particularly if you





are foreign-born here in America, you can give your own date. You can choose your own date; you can choose your own place of birth--except that you have to state the country of birth correctly--so this is not completely reliable. And then as I went along, I said to myself, "My goodness, what is reliable?"

Then there was the problem of famous legends of music. Consider, for instance, the case of Mozart's burial. You read in all the dictionaries, Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, and the basic biographies of Mozart, that Mozart was buried on a December day in Vienna when there was a blizzard (an unusual phenomenon in Vienna, but still not impossible), and the blizzard was so bad that people could not accompany Mozart's body to the cemetery, and that therefore he was buried in a pauper's grave. Well, just about every detail of this story is false. And yet, one of the greatest Mozartologists, Professor [Erich] Schenk of the University of Vienna, fell for it, and described it in dramatic detail, and even said that the snowballs or hail was so large, they were almost as large as tennis balls, and they practically prevented, physically prevented, many people from trying to make that trip to the cemetery.

Now, all this was mighty strange. I wondered why this blizzard was not reported in the first biography of Mozart, written by a Danish diplomatic officer, [Georg



Nissen] who actually married Mozart's wife. There was no mention of the blizzard. And yet he tried to explain why Mozart's wife could not follow Mozart's body to the cemetery--because at that time women were not commonly admitted to cemeteries (it was strictly a male proposition to take care of funerals), and besides she was herself in a terrible state of nerves, and even physically ill. He didn't explain why she or he didn't pay the dues for Mozart's grave for eight years--and this is why Mozart's body was removed from his grave and buried in the common grave, not because he was poor or anything like that; the family simply failed to pay. The same thing would happen to anybody, even in the United States. Now, if you die, if I die, and if our families don't pay either for perpetual care or annual dues, then I regret to say, our bodies will be thrown out. [laughter]

BERTONNEAU: You get evicted for not paying the rent.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. Mozart or no Mozart. See, that was the reason why Mozart's grave was never identified. Undoubtedly it was there, very much identified, in 1791, when he died.

Now, this was very interesting to me. And then I picked up another biography of Mozart, published in 1842 in England--also no mention of the blizzard. And then I did the simplest thing in the world. I simply wrote to the meteorological bureau in Vienna (they kept records, I knew, for hundreds of years), and I asked them to let me know what kind of weather



prevailed on December 6, 1791, when Mozart was buried. And I received, practically by return mail (airmail was already available), notice that it was a rather pleasant December day; there was some drizzle in the morning, but it cleared up in the afternoon when Mozart's body was taken from the Cathedral of St. Stephen and conducted to the cemetery, Mark's Cemetery, (no connection with Karl Marx, but St. Mark's Cemetery), and that its temperature was three or four degrees above the freezing point, which excluded any kind of blizzard. Well, I was not satisfied with just this bare announcement, because I thought there could have been an error. But then a weather report was also found in a diary of a Viennese official who attended the funeral and said that the day was pleasant, and that the zephyr blew (zephyr, of course, was western wind, which usually brought mild weather). Well, anyway, no blizzard--that was for sure.

Then I had to investigate who started it all, and to my horror I found that the whole story was started by the man who is generally regarded as the top Mozartologist of them all, Otto Jahn, who published his four-volume biography of Mozart in 1856. So I read this account in his biography in the original German edition, and the blizzard was there. And there was a tiny footnote that the description of the blizzard was taken from a Vienna paper called



Montagblatt (Monday Gazette) unsigned, that this was the first inkling that there was a blizzard, and that it was published in January 1856, precisely on Mozart's centennial of birth. Then, I became deeply suspicious. I couldn't get this Montagblatt anywhere in the United States because it was one of those papers, you know, fly-by-night papers, that were not kept in large libraries. It's like the National Enquirer here, you know, [laughter] which you can read and you find all kinds of stories, flying saucers and extrasensory perception and what have you. So I wrote to Vienna, and I asked for a copy of this newspaper. They couldn't find it even in Vienna. Finally the state library in Vienna provided me with a copy. And there was also a notice that the account was written by the tavern keeper who was a friend of Mozart (Mozart used to come to his place and drink wine). Now, if that was written in 1856 by Mozart's favorite tavern keeper, then how old was the tavern keeper, considering that it was Mozart's centennial? So the tavern keeper should have been at least of age, over twenty-one in order to keep tavern in 1791. So I did some arithmetical calculations and I realized that he had to be at least ninety-five years old at the time if he was younger than Mozart; even assuming that he was ten years younger than Mozart, still he would have been ninety.

Then I read the whole, the complete text, which I





finally obtained, and I realized that it wasn't written by any tavern keeper; it was written by an experienced journalist. There were all kinds of historical references to places in Vienna at the time, and also the present condition of the same places; it was a thorough journalistic job. And then the whole thing became clear to me. I can't prove it, but it's very obvious that in January 1856, the editor told one of his reporters to write a story about Mozart, seeing that it was his centennial. So someone wrote this story and put the blizzard in. Why? It's very difficult to discover, because the story generally speaking was at least plausible--I mean, it was romantic, but it was plausible. But there were certain things that arrested my attention. For instance, there was a sentence in which the author reports what the tavern keeper said to himself--he said, "He said to himself how Maestro must be sick because he didn't finish his favorite wine." Now, when it comes to the point of what the tavern keeper said to himself about sixty-five years after the event, then it is highly suspicious. [laughter] However, this very phrase led some reputable scholars to conclude that the tavern keeper was the author of this story, and that's how the whole thing started. It was signed "Ein Mann von dem Volke," that is, "A man of the people." That is, it was completely anonymous, obviously. So the whole edifice just fell down. I mean, nothing could be relied upon there.



And then, of course, there was no blizzard, so that was out.

But what was amazing to me was that first of all Otto Jahn himself didn't realize that the report was unreliable, and that not one Mozart biographer for 100 years bothered to look up the original source. They had to wait, figuratively, for me to inquire from Vienna whether it was so. Well, I was in Vienna in 1963, and I actually made the trip from the cathedral to the cemetery. Well, I took the streetcar. And it was in December. It happened to be in December, and it happened to be a very cold December, but no blizzard. And I consulted various reference books, and snowfalls or blizzards in Vienna are exceedingly rare at any time of the year. Well, anyway, I didn't have to investigate any further. It was clear to me exactly what happened. So this was a piece of investigative reporting of which I was rather proud.

BERTONNEAU: I think you were also responsible for demythologizing a story about Beethoven's Third Symphony.

SLONIMSKY: Well, this I probably was not the only one, because that was clear for anyone to see. Because this famous story that he tore up the dedication page and said, "So Napoleon is a tyrant like they all are," and rededicated it "To the memory of a great man". . . . There is still a mystery as to why he wrote that dedication. But everybody



knew that the title page existed. So he couldn't have torn it up, whatever happened. He could have said that-- there is no way of proving that someone did not say something; it just can't be proved. But the page exists, so he didn't tear it up. He did cross out the dedication to Napoleon. (Incidentally, it was dedicated to Bonaparte, and Napoleon as the emperor didn't care to be reminded of his lowly Corsican Italian origin. So Bonaparte was a slip on Beethoven's part, if he wanted to dedicate it to Napoleon, as probably was the case.)

And then there was this business of who reported it. [Anton] Schindler reported it in his biography. He didn't say that he was actually there when it happened; he just reported an event that took place in 1804. And the story is usually copied from Schindler. But how old was Schindler in 1804? He was born in 1795, so he was nine years old. Was he a witness? No, he didn't meet Beethoven until he was twenty-one years old, twelve years after the event. So, again, the whole thing just could not be sustained. Furthermore, Beethoven in a letter to his publishers, written several months after Napoleon proclaimed himself emperor, referred to the Third Symphony as "eigentlich Buonaparte gennant" (really called "Bonaparte"). So he couldn't have been so indignant about Bonaparte. Furthermore, in Beethoven's conversations [Konversation], which are



fortunately preserved in Hefte, those little bound books, because Beethoven was deaf (there's one benefit of Beethoven's deafness, that those conversation books exist)--and there, while Napoleon was still living, a publisher who visited Beethoven in Vienna mentioned that an Austrian composer was writing a mass for [Napoleon] for his chapel on the island of St. Helena. He said to Beethoven, "Really, you should have written that mass, rather than this secondary Vienna composer." And Beethoven said, "Yes, I might have, because Napoleon did a great deal for art." Now, all these facts don't show that Beethoven was so irate about Napoleon's assuming the title of emperor--again, we don't know, he may have said what he's reputed to have said, just as he may have said about the Fifth Symphony, "Thus fate knocks at the door," although he specifically denied it. I really can't claim credit for that. I can claim credit for the weather at Mozart's funeral, really, but not for this business, because it's too easily discoverable by just figuring out who reported it. And Schindler credited this report to a pupil of Beethoven named [Ferdinand] Ries. But Ries dictated his memoirs on his deathbed, and, again, it's not clear to whom he dictated and whether he approved it. Now Ries died, and the memoirs were published after Ries's death. And this was the first time that the story was mentioned about Beethoven's being so perturbed by Napoleon's





proclamation of the empire. And the dates are as follows: Beethoven died in 1827, and Ries died in 1852, if I'm not mistaken. So this was years and years after the event of writing the Eroica, which was completed in August 1804. And Napoleon proclaimed himself emperor in May 1804. So it just doesn't seem reasonable to suppose any of those things happened.

But I did find out that Beethoven really died during an electrical storm; there was an electrical storm on the afternoon of Beethoven's death, on March 26 (say, there will be an anniversary tomorrow), 1827. There was an electrical storm. I checked on that with the weather bureau in Vienna. But that Beethoven lifted his right hand or clenched his fist and threatened the skies, this story remains on the conscience of people who reported it. [laughter] Of course, this was a melodramatic time, so there had to be reports of this nature. And also people who claimed to be around Beethoven, actually witnessing his last moments, they have multiplied. At first, there were only two; then there were five; then there were ten. [laughter] And I went to Beethoven's room where he died, and there was simply no place, no room, for a crowd of people to be there. Then there is the question of how many, what kind of a crowd accompanied Beethoven to the cemetery. Of course, Beethoven's grave was identifiable. Well, some reports say



30,000 people. That would mean that about one-third of the entire population of Vienna at the time accompanied Beethoven's body to the cemetery, [laughter] including children, which is of course nonsense.

But those things never can be verified. Still, all those little things gave me pause, to put it mildly. I realized that you could not trust accounts, even accounts of people who were there, who were present. Well, those are the most obvious cases, and there were many others, of course.

BERTONNEAU: Briefly, would you tell the story about your discovery of the real origin of the word jazz?

SLONIMSKY: Well, now, again I cannot claim this, because it was actually known, but it was published in obscure sources. It was one of those things that anyone could discover for the asking. Of course, I realized that jazz was not the product of New Orleans, as is very often said; that was ragtime, that was Dixie ragtime. I corresponded with several people who were members of various ragtime bands, and invariably they wrote me that they were the ones who started jazz and called themselves jazz players. They were not. Because from records, it was obvious that they conducted ragtime bands and not jazz bands. It was simply a mistake in memory. They referred to it as jazz because later this type of music became known as jazz.



Now, the only discovery that I made was a report in Variety magazine of October 1916, which referred to a jazz band (spelled J-A-S-S) giving a show in a Chicago nightclub. That was the first mention of any kind of jazz band. But three years before, in a little publication, The Call Bulletin, published in San Francisco, the word jazz was specifically mentioned in connection with a ballgame in the sports column. Then the word jazz was applied as pep, as enthusiasm and energy. But still there was that word jazz (J-A-Z-Z) in print for the first time in March 1913. I didn't discover it myself. I corresponded with various people, and then I found a person who was working on the subject, the editor of a magazine that was called Jazz [Ralph Gleason] and which was published for a couple of years in 1934. So again I could not claim priority in the discovery of it. But it was amazing that for years historians of American music kept repeating the story of the New Orleans origin of jazz. Well, this was available, actually available in the libraries. (And this happened to me numerous times afterwards; I mean, something is available in an obscure publication, but you have to know that it is available, so in a way it is a re-discovery.) Well, anyway, I published the article in the fourth edition of Music Since 1900, in 1971. And then after that, of course, there was no excuse for anyone investigating jazz to relate it to New Orleans



again. The style may have been already that; it was a gradual progression from ragtime to jazz.

It's already impossible to establish the origin of rock and roll, and yet there was a published piece called "Rock and Roll" from a musical called Transatlantic, which was played very briefly in 1934, and I have a copy of this piece called "Rock and Roll." It's in the style of barcarole, just like barcaroling. So it makes sense. But of course it doesn't have the rhythm of rock and roll, and it's entirely possible that rock and roll is simply a phrase. I mean, traveling by ship you rock and you roll, yaw and--what's the other word?

BERTONNEAU: Pitch and yaw.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, pitch and yaw. I mean, it could have been pitch and yaw. And then of course rock and roll skyrocketed, and then roll fell off, and now it's simply rock. Very recently I found a communication in the section of letters to the editor in the New York Times from some informed person claiming that rock is a splinter type from rock and roll, and that rock and roll had some vitality, particularly a diversity of rhythm (as represented by the Beatles and perhaps even Elvis Presley), but that rock has lost all its electrons, so to speak, and become completely dehumanized. And that's why it is so raucous and straight and constantly maintaining 4/4 time, practically without syncopation (and





syncopation was the soul of ragtime and jazz and even rock and roll to some extent).

BERTONNEAU: Well, how many editions of the International Cyclopedia did you edit then?

SLONIMSKY: Well, I edited all editions after Oscar Thompson died in 1945, up to the eighth edition. So I edited five editions--the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, the seventh, and the eighth. But, you know, they cannot be called editions. They were reprints, and my only additions, the only additions that I could possibly introduce there were occasional replacements of individual articles and then an appendix giving corrections of dates in the original book and some added articles on new composers and new musicians. They were not editions; they were reprints. I felt very unhappy about the whole affair because there were so many errors that it was simply intolerable, and I felt that I was in a way responsible for it, which, of course, I wasn't, because this was published in 1939 simultaneously with the publication by Macmillan of another one-volume encyclopedia, edited by Albert Weir--I call him "Weird" for short or for long--[laughter] he's dead now.

Now, [Thompson] put together that huge encyclopedia, which he threw together from various sources, mostly by just straight copying without any regard to the accuracy of it. I had some nightmarish experiences with early editions



of the International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians. I liked Thompson very much. He was a very fine person. But I can't forget some events that really shook my faith in lexicographical scholarship and research. I remember I called on Thompson one day; it must have been in 1938, when he was in the throes of putting that dictionary together. And I saw a very strange sight. There were a couple of girls and a young man who were busy typing away information from other dictionaries, and I saw exactly what those dictionaries were. And there was also Riemann's Musik Lexikon. Well, I realized that it was not being edited; it was being thrown together. Thompson came out, and he was very busy. In fact, it was in the office of Musical America, which he was editing (at the same time he was writing music reviews for the New York Sun, which existed then). He was busy. He couldn't devote himself to this encyclopedia; he had a few helpers. I was an associate editor, and there were other helpers, but this could not have been done this way. It was just out of the question. And he came out--he had a set of galley proofs, and he asked me whether I would read the galleys. It was the complete letter r. So I said, "Yes, of course, I [will]. When do you want them back?" So he looked at the clock. It was a quarter of twelve. So he said, "Well, the printer is coming back at two o'clock." So I said, "You want me to



read the entire letter r in a couple of hours and have lunch in between?" So he said, "Well, there's no choice." And then I said to myself--well, I really exclaimed to myself--this was one of those illuminations that come in a dreadful moment. . . . I realized that there was one composer whose name began with the letter R that usually appears in triplicate. . . . I think I told you this story.

BERTONNEAU: Could be. Go on in case.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, his name was [Cornelius] Rybner. It was spelled three different ways. And so I got him three different ways, and I took away two of them, and so forth. Well, those were the conditions of editing.

BERTONNEAU: So your association with the International Cyclopedia lasted until 19\_\_?

SLONIMSKY: Until 1958. That was the last edition. Then I had disagreement with the publishers. I told them that certain things had to be corrected which were simply inadmissible in an encyclopedia, and the publishers told me that it was too expensive; they could not afford it. Well, this terminated my association, my collaboration in that particular edition. I was not too sorry because I realized that I couldn't do anything. Also I felt it was not fair to advertise those editions as the eighth edition and the ninth edition, while they were in fact the same edition just patched up with an appendix, practically



unusable. And then this ninth edition appeared, and that was certainly unsatisfactory. It was not correlated, although the new editor gave me a lot of praise for my investigative zeal and so forth. But he didn't seem to do any work, even on such an elementary thing as bringing up to date the death dates of various composers who had died in between. So this new edition was published in 1964. And I must say that I was disgusted with it--not because I was practically fired; it may have been also that. But. . . .





TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE TWO

MARCH 25, 1977

BERTONNEAU: Let's talk about Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians which you also edited.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, this, of course, was my real job. I became associated with Baker's Dictionary through Schirmer. I had friends there, and I was a contributor to the Musical Quarterly; I knew the editor, Carl Engel, long dead since. I began comparing Baker with other publications, and I realized that there were errors in Baker as well, although I didn't realize the extent of those errors. There were many things in that dictionary that did not suit my idea of lexicographical consistency, but still it was a very convenient one-volume reference work on musical biography. I found that in many respects it followed the Riemann's Musik Lexikon too closely in its format, particularly in the tedious enumeration of academic titles, such as someone becoming a Privatdozent, which is not an American title but strictly a German title; and then becoming an extraordinary professor, which is lower than ordinary professor, and professor inordinary--all these things were faithfully transplanted from Riemann's Lexikon, where it had their place, because in Germany all those titles are important. But I found that the dictionary was cluttered up with all this unnecessary information.



However, I limited myself first to correcting actual mistakes, and this was my contribution to a supplement, which I really compiled all by myself. That was in 1949. I was paid a munificent sum of \$250 for putting together a little booklet of 150 pages. [laughter] It is not a very generous payment, but that was 1949, and, anyway, I would have done it for nothing, because I was glad to introduce some kind of uniformity in this thing. At the same time I began corresponding with the editors of Riemann's dictionary and then other publications of a similar nature.

Then, after 1950, Schirmer and Hans Heinsheimer, who was the director of publications, decided that the time had come for a completely revised edition of Baker's Dictionary, and I was entrusted with this task. And I started very seriously to work on that. I had some excellent helpers. But as I dug into it, I realized that there were scorpions and all kinds of dreadful creatures hidden in all those biographies, and also that there were some terrible mistranslations from Riemann and from other sources. The more I dug into those biographies, the less I liked it. And then there were certain things that--well, I just didn't know how to deal with it. I discovered that Theodore Baker, when he put this dictionary together in 1899 (the publication date was 1900), simply helped himself to a lot of stuff from Grove's Dictionary without even bothering to change the



British spelling. [laughter] So now I just took it for granted that the basic articles, such as articles on Rossini, for instance, could be left alone. I checked on the dates, and the dates seemed all right. I didn't care for the language, which seemed terribly stilted, but I wanted to preserve something from Baker. I didn't want to demolish all of Baker. And besides it would have been impossible, because the dictionary was growing and growing; it was reaching 2,000 pages, and the publishers began to show some impatience as to where it would all end. So I just closed my eyes to Rossini and other things. But then I found certain things that I didn't like at all, particularly in the Rossini article. It said there, for instance, "Then Rossini arrived in Paris with only fifteen pounds sterling in his pocket." So I asked myself, "Why should he find himself with fifteen pounds sterling in his pocket?" And there were other things. And then I found that he was given the "honour" of being presented. . . . And then I said to myself, "What am I reading, anyway? Is this an American dictionary?" And then, literally during the night, I suddenly had an inspiration, or rather a nightmare. I said to myself, "Baker must have copied it from Grove, or from some British dictionary." It could have only been Grove, which was published in 1883, 1884. And I have the original first edition of Grove's Dictionary, which



fortunately I had purchased. So I went to that particular volume, and so what do I find? That Rossini found himself with fifteen pounds sterling in his pocket, and the whole bit. I found that Baker copied the Rossini article practically word for word. And then I realized that he did the same with the article on Louis Spohr and also the editor before me omitted the enumeration of works by Spohr and simply said, "For his works see Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians." Now, I found that it was a very strange way of selling a dictionary, by telling you to look up some other dictionary. So I restored this particular section. And then I began finding more and more of same. One sentence I'll never forget; that was about Mascagni, "Mascagni's father, who was a lawyer, wanted Mascagni to be also a lawyer, and so Mascagni had to study music by stealth"--curious expression. So I looked up Grove; what do I find? "Mascagni's father wanted him to be a lawyer and so Mascagni was compelled to study music by stealth." So I looked up the Oxford Companion to Music; what do I find? "Mascagni's father wanted him to be a lawyer, so Mascagni was forced to study music by stealth." [laughter] I found "by stealth" in every dictionary. So I'm just not going to tolerate this kind of business. And still I didn't know what to do because those articles were more or less accurate, except this particular reference, because since then Mascagni's correspondence with his father has been





published, from which it appears that Mascagni went to the conservatory of Milan and dutifully reported to his father every detail of his music studies. So he certainly didn't study music by stealth; he certainly studied music with the full approbation of his father. So not only did several dictionaries repeat the same ridiculous phrase, "by stealth," but on top of everything it was blatantly incorrect. So I got quite provoked by it.

And then I was late with the delivery of the galleys. The publishers kept calling me from New York, desperately asking for the stuff. They didn't care. I mean, old man Schirmer was quite a character, and they needed the stuff. So I had a meeting arranged. I went to New York, and we all met, Schirmer and the others, and we all sat together and set to discuss the situation. I explained that this Rossini article was copied almost word for word from Grove, and I said that Macmillan was publishing a new edition of Grove, to be issued in 1954, and they could simply sue us for obvious plagiarism. Schirmer said, "Well, they didn't sue us for forty years. They wouldn't sue us now." So I said, anyway, "I cannot face such a situation." I had a nightmare that the dictionary would be published in this form, and then some reviewer would have a column, "Funny Coincidence Department," as in The New Yorker, quoting a paragraph from the supposedly new edition of Baker's



Dictionary and a paragraph from Grove, which was appearing at practically the same time. And this would have been just absolutely impossible. So I explained to the director of publications that there was no choice but to revise at least these articles completely, those that were obviously copied from Grove. Still, they were already in galley proofs. So that cost money. In the end, this business cost the publisher thousands of dollars. I was quite distressed, and they were distressed.

And then Schirmer himself, who as I say was quite a character, opened this dictionary, and he said, "Who are all those people in this dictionary?" I said, "They are musicians." So he opened the page on Rameau and said, "And who is Raymo?" So I said, "It's not Raymo, it's Rameau." And all those people sitting there and saying absolutely nothing--I mean, the editors and so forth--because Schirmer was an old-fashioned tycoon, you know, who talked like that. [laughter] So I said, "Rameau was rather important." So they all sat, you know, barely suppressing their smiles. And this was Schirmer. So Schirmer said, "Well, of course, we must have Menotti, and we must have Bernstein, and we must have Beethoven, and we must have John M. Williams." I said, "Who is John M. Williams?" "Why, he wrote 'Ten Little Fingers,'" which was selling millions by Schirmer. [laughter] Well, fortunately, I have a sense of humor, but. . . . Well,



I didn't tell him that this sort of judgment did not agree with mine. I just said that I would do my best.

And I did do my best, except the dictionary appeared (finally it was published in 1958), probably delayed by nearly a year, and for a time it wasn't even available in print. So that was not very pleasant, but at least there weren't such dreadful things as obvious plagiarism, which I repeat was due to Theodore Baker doing a little horse-thieving in 1900, at which time it was probably perfectly all right because I found since then that there were other strange instances. For instance, the editor of the second edition, named Alfred Rémy, used a whole section on singers and pianists taken from another book, edited by César Saerchinger, called International Who's Who, published in 1918. So how come? I realized that that International Who's Who was edited by a man named César Saerchinger, and that the same César Saerchinger also was a contributor to Baker published in 1928, and that he simply used the same articles for two different publications.

Well, so the more I was going into the old editions of Baker's Dictionary, the more horrified I became. And then I said to myself, "Well, I simply mustn't be preoccupied with what they did before me." I was faced with a really gigantic and quite unexpected task of being compelled to reedit or re-write practically all basic articles. Now, this I was not



prepared to do. I expected to leave the basic articles alone and then write new articles and also enlarge articles on modern composers, add about 500 composers who didn't make it in 1949 or in 1940 (there were several editions and then the supplements). Quite a situation. And then there was also a curious type of judgment. For instance, in the article on Berlioz, I found the judgment of Berlioz as being rather bizarre in his compositions. Now, it may have been all right in 1899--even in 1899 it wasn't all right, but in 1956 it was completely out of the question. And in the same article on Berlioz, the editor, apparently Baker, who wrote this article--Baker himself--said Berlioz was "undoubtedly genial." So that was curious, because if anything Berlioz was not genial. Then I realized that he was using the German idiom, ein genialer Mensch, "undoubtedly was a man of genius." See, Baker lived practically all his life in Germany, and he began writing English with German semantics. [laughter] So this was another discovery that was quite strange.

Anyway, I don't know just how I went through that, but anyway it was published in 1958. Of course, the moment it was published, I began discovering the most horrible errors which either I overlooked, or in some cases I was even guilty of making those boo-boos that I didn't dare to confess to myself. And so the director of publication said, "Well, you're not without fault. You can't be absolutely right." So I





said, "Well, there's certain things that I shouldn't have done, particularly about performers. I just made terrible mistakes." Such as--well, I'd better not even mention some of them, but there were certain things that, well, at least loomed very large to me. And then I realized that they were not so appalling to others. My dictionary was highly praised--I mean, my edition of Baker's Dictionary. There was even a special broadcast over WQXR entitled "New Discoveries by Nicolas Slonimsky in His Edition of Baker's Dictionary." There were feature articles in the chief newspapers in the United States and also abroad. And yet I didn't feel happy. Because, you see, what I saw were those terrible mistakes that I either failed to correct, or I committed them myself. Well, I confessed most of them in the preface to my supplement in 1965, and then the supplement in 1971, but confessions didn't help me much. And then I felt that I also was procreating a series of mistakes in other dictionaries which began copying my edition of Baker's Dictionary on the supposition that I was practically infallible. I could tell you a lot of anecdotes which to me don't even sound funny when I realize that I was the one who started an error. Sometimes it was just a misprint which was faithfully reproduced in various editions. I misspelled the name of an Hungarian composer, living in the United States now [Kondorossy], in the most inadmissible way, "R-S-S," this kind



of combination which doesn't occur in any language (I simply omitted the vowel o; somehow it fell out). So what happened? This article was incorporated in the next edition of the International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians, by that time edited by my successor, and I began seeing those things proliferating. I didn't even feel that it was funny. I actually felt guilty, as if I was doing something that was not honest.

And when I finally finished the last article in the Zs of Baker's Dictionary, I was in such a state that I could--I almost had a brain fever. And in that state I wrote up an article on the nonexistent composer. I invented a composer to end my dictionary with. His name was Zyžík, guaranteed to be the last name in the dictionary. And his first name was Krst, no vowels. He was born in Pressburg on February 29, 1900 (no such date, 1900, because it was not a leap year day, except in Russia--no such date). He was born in Pressburg; then he traveled widely to Pozsony and Bratislava (Pozsony is the Hungarian name of Pressburg, and Bratislava is the Czech name of Pressburg, so he traveled from Pressburg to Pressburg under different names). And he composed an oratorio to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the Diet of Worms [laughter]--of course, worms is Worms, a city in Germany, and diet is not a diet but a parliament--"The Diet of Worms in vermicular counterpoint." (Of course, "vermicular" means worm-ridden; so since it was a diet of



Worms, so it was in vermicular counterpoint.) It was written for bel canto type of singing, with the main aria being "Strč prst skrz krk," no vowels; that was bel canto, beautiful singing, and so on and so forth. [laughter] And at the end, in the bibliography, I even allowed myself to make some mildly obscene approximations of the word organ and male and female choruses, you know, in Czech, as far as my ability to make puns in Czech went.

Well, I managed to introduce that particular business. And so that sort of relieved me; whenever I concoct something like that, I feel relieved. So I sent the whole thing to the editor at Schirmer's and thought that they would have a good laugh over it. So what happened? They set it in type, and I got the galleys back with all those diacritical signs in the Czech language carefully corrected when they were missing, and the whole thing was right there in print. Well, I thought that the joke went a little bit too far, because I thought that since other dictionary makers, including European dictionary makers, began to copy my edition of Baker, then I just imagined that Zyzák could become quite a famous personality. So I called up the editor, my dear late friend Nat Broder, and I said, "Look, a joke is a joke. But don't you see that this is complete nonsense?" So he said, "How do I know? You have so many crazy Czech composers. How did I know that this particular Czech composer was a phony?" Well, anyway,



we removed him. But Hans Heinsheimer, director of publications at Schirmer's, told me afterwards that I should have let it stand, and then when other dictionaries had their own Zyzík there, that then Schirmer could do something about it because this would be proof of plagiarism. But I don't believe it would have worked.

Well, I should say that every name in this dictionary, particularly obscure names, became to me a source of personal concern. And as I said, the most difficult part was to find out what happened to all those people. In one case--I don't remember whether I mentioned to you the case of Walter Dahms.

BERTONNEAU: I don't think so.

SLONIMSKY: Well, that was really fit for a detective story. I found that a German musicologist named Walter Dahms figured in every dictionary, in Riemann's Musik Lexikon, in Baker's of course, in the International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians of Thompson--they all copied each other. But nevertheless, there was this Dahms, who published several monographs on German composers. And then according to my edition (I mean the previous edition of Baker), he went to Rome in 1921 . . . and after that not a word. Now, I wrote to Germany, asked about Dahms, and no one seemed to know about Dahms. And then it became a sort of an obsession with me. Every time I would meet someone from Germany or from Central Europe, in general (at that time there was quite a





wave of refugees from Central Europe; that was immediately after the war--well, not refugees, but just emigrants). . . . I met a lady from Prague [Mrs. Vogel], and I again mentioned Dahms--I mean, speaking of my dictionaries. So she said, "Dahms? I know him very well. I saw him recently in Lisbon, Portugal." So I said, "Really?" I said, "You are the first person to give me any news of him after 1921." So she said, "Sure, he's in Lisbon." She said, "He writes in Portuguese. He changed his name. I don't remember his Portuguese name, but he's there." So I said, "Are you sure?" Yes," she said, "I'm absolutely sure." So in my supplement in 1965, I added this bit of information, that he went to Lisbon and was living there, at least in 1960 (that was the time when I heard about it).

Now, completely unbeknownst to me, this started a terrific ruckus in the editorial offices of Riemann's Musik Lexikon in Lisbon and various other places. [laughter] I wrote to the editor of Riemann's Musik Lexikon [Horst Adams], with whom I was in constant correspondence (they were tremendously helpful in giving me information about German composers), and I asked him whether he could verify this information about Dahms being in Lisbon. Although I fully trusted this lady musicologist from Prague, still I wanted to be absolutely sure. In his reply, he sent me copies of his voluminous correspondence with a German musicologist



who actually lived in Lisbon whose name was [Santiago] Kastner, no connection with Dahms. So the editor of Riemann's Musik Lexikon wrote to this man Kastner, a German living in Lisbon, and asked him whether Walter Dahms was actually in Lisbon. To which this musicologist replied that he knows a lot of Germans in Lisbon, but he has no idea who Dahms may be, and furthermore he inquired at the German consulate and they didn't know Walter Dahms. He said that the only supposition is that perhaps a former German national who lived in Lisbon but whose name was [Walter] Gualtério Armando was perhaps Walter Dahms who changed his name. And accordingly, he wrote a letter to this Gualtério Armando, asking him whether he was identical with Walter Dahms. He said that he was acting at the request of the editor of Reimann's Musik Lexikon. To which he received an amazing letter from Gualtério Armando saying, in effect, "I cannot understand what you are trying to do by conducting some curious spying actions behind my back. I can tell you that I have nothing to do with the person mentioned, Herr W.D."--he didn't even say Walter Dahms--"that I'm identical only with myself. I hope that this will put an end to your actions for which I cannot find a proper name." [laughter] So this German sent a copy of this letter to the editor of Riemann's Musik Lexikon and said that he was quite shocked at this kind of rebuff. He also wrote to Gualtério Armando



saying that he inquired in good faith simply because he was asked to inquire, and he thought that maybe there was a question of identity, but that he certainly didn't intend to meddle with his personal affairs or whatever. At the same time he wrote to Riemann and said that this certainly was a terrible rebuff and said, "I absolutely wash my hands of this question of Walter Dahms." But he said, "On the other hand, I can't understand why he should be so vehement in denying his identity. So maybe this asshole"--he used the German expression Arschloch--"maybe he is Walter Dahms, and maybe he has something to hide, because he's so vehement in his denial."

Well, anyway, when I got all this correspondence, I said to myself, "Well, I've got to find out whether Gualtério Armando is Walter Dahms or not." I figured out that Gualtério was really Walter, and that if you take the letters from the word Armando you could make up Dahms almost. Then he sent a curriculum vitae, this Armando, to Riemann, which coincided pretty nearly with the known curriculum vitae of Dahms, except that he was born in June 18, 1887--I mean, Walter Dahms--while Armando said that he was born on the same date, except in 1897. In other words, he diminished his age by ten years. But he wrote monographs on German composers, and he continued to write those monographs and publish them in Germany under the name of Armando. So this was too much of



a coincidence. And besides, I still had the lady's word that she knew him personally. And then I wrote to the editor of Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart, which is the huge German encyclopedia, and I reported this thing to them. Since they had Walter Dahm's name, also I asked them whether they had any information. So the editor replied, said, "Yes, we had the same unpleasant experience. When we asked whether he was Walter Dahms, he exploded, and he said he didn't want to have his name represented in this encyclopedia at all, that he was not going to answer any such question." And the editor of Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart added, "There must have been something rather sinister in his life if he is so vehement at the very supposition that he may be identical with Walter Dahms." Well, anyway, so I then decided to report in my next supplement to Baker, 1971--I felt that I was justified in saying that Walter Dahms assumed the name of Gualtério Armando. But the director of publications told me that it was very dangerous, that this Armando could sue Schirmer for whatever--I mean, not defamation of character but false identification or whatever it could be. So I used circumlocution. I said that Walter Dahms went to Lisbon and remained there, published monographs in German, and assumed a Portuguese name which had 60 percent of the letters in his original name. And then I explained to the director of publications that if Armando sues





Schirmer, he has absolutely no reason, because he denies that he is Walter Dahms; he says he's Gualtério Armando, and I never mentioned any Gualtério Armando. I simply said that he assumed a Portuguese name. So there is no Walter Dahms, according to his own declaration. So nobody can sue us, and Gualtério Armando cannot sue us because his name is not mentioned. Well, anyway, so then finally this Gualtério Armando or Walter Dahms died three years ago, so that was the end of that. But still it goes to show how dangerous it is to be a compiler of dictionaries. You said that I had to become a detective, but in this case not only was I a private eye, but I was actually threatened (I mean, through that correspondence, not personally).

There were other cases that were very amusing, and perhaps not so amusing. For instance, there is a British composer who was very much displeased by the fact that he was revealed to be born in 1891 instead of 1898, when he wanted to be born, and he accused my good friend Percy Scholes, the compiler of the Oxford Companion to Music, of, as he put it, "Clapping a few years onto" his name. So Scholes wrote me and asked me whether I had justification of giving the date. Of course, I had; I had his birth certificate. Furthermore his name was a Hindu name, Kaikhosru Sorabji. But I found that his first name was not Kaikhosru, but just plain Dudley. And so I wrote to the editor of Grove's



Dictionary, Eric Bloom, with whom I was also in active correspondence, asking him whether he would justify this, whether it was correct. So he wrote me back and said, "Yes, it's absolutely correct. His true name is Dudley, and I've known it for years. But if you put it in your dictionary, then he will take the next plane to the United States and assassinate you personally." Well anyway, under such circumstances I felt that it wasn't at all up to the profession as described by Dr. Johnson, as "harmless drudge" (he said that a lexicographer is a harmless drudge). So I became quite either harmful, or myself being in danger.

But, of course, I never realized that there are people, not only would they falsify their ages, which is understandable, but falsify their country origin and, in the case of Walter Dahms, deny their true identity. Now, this was a total surprise to me.

BERTONNEAU: It sounds like the subject for a good comic opera.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, well, it wasn't even too comical. And then one more story. I had a letter--see, my fame as a detective apparently spread. I had a letter from Rome, from a Russian woman who had just left the Soviet Union, arrived in Rome. And she had a father, a violinist in the United States. Did I tell you this story?

BERTONNEAU: No, I don't think so.



SLONIMSKY: Well, anyway, she asked me if I could possibly find out whether her father [Vassili Bezekirsky] was living or dead in the United States, because she was not in contact with him for twenty-five or thirty years since the Revolution, and he apparently left her mother and emigrated to the United States before the Second World War. So I thought that this was a thing to do, you know. So it was very difficult to track down this obscure violinist who taught in one school, and then he went to another school. But then finally, from one school to another, I found a few people who knew him, and they told me that he retired to a small town in upstate New York. So I got in touch with him. I received a reply from him explaining that he was living there in retirement. And I wrote to his daughter.

BERTONNEAU: Were they happily reunited?

SLONIMSKY: Well, I gave her the glad news that her father was alive, and this was his address. I must say that I felt awfully good. I mean, I really did something wonderful. I reunited a father with his daughter.

Well, this is not the end. [laughter] It is quite different. I never heard from her or from him--I mean, for a few months. So I wrote him, and I said, "Several months ago"--it was already several months ago--"I received a letter from your daughter, and I gave her your address. I wonder whether you ever got in touch with her, whether you received



my letter. I wanted to know whether my mission was accomplished." To which I received a postcard from the father saying, "Your mission was certainly successfully accomplished. But I received a number of extremely unpleasant and demanding letters from my daughter which I cannot satisfy. I have no money, and I cannot help you. Yours sincerely," So-and-so. So instead of reuniting father and daughter, I did this.

[laughter]

Now, those are things--if they were not true, they would have been funny. But this was certainly extraordinary, particularly since I really tried awfully hard to find that person. And I can tell you that I've conducted such inquiries in I don't know how many cases. Sometimes people actually asked me from Russia, for instance, even top Russian musicologists asking me for information about their own musicians. And in two or three cases I succeeded in discovering what happened to them. And to me it's always a cause for celebration when I discover something utterly impossible to find out.





TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE ONE

APRIL 7, 1977

BERTONNEAU: This is probably going to be our last audio taping session, so we're going to be very informal, I guess, and try to bring you up to the present. To start with, I hope you'll tell the story of the big surprise which befell you in the 1950s, which is even edifying.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, it was a big surprise to me and to all my friends. For the first time in my life I earned big money, real big money. And I earned it on television for everyone to see, so I was really at the peak of my exhibitionism.

[laughter] Nothing can be higher in a person's road to fame or road to glory or road to scientific or literary or musical accomplishment than to be seen by millions of people accumulating money for just giving right answers to a rather silly quiz. And I certainly derived a great deal of philosophical gratification, or philosophical wonderment, as to why my books, or whatever I was doing--compositions, my Thesaurus of Scales, and all those accomplishments (if they were accomplishments)--meant absolutely nothing to the masses, or, for that matter, to my publishers, or even to some of my friends who expressed their friendship and admiration for me; but the moment I got on that television quiz and began ringing down the



shekels, big money, all of a sudden I became a celebrity. And people who thought that I was just one of those, you know, dull people who write books that nobody wants to read and books that cannot sell, or if they sell, they sell in a few thousands and then they stop selling after that, so that financially I could never be regarded as a success--then all of a sudden I was a success for entirely wrong reasons.

BERTONNEAU: Let's stop a second and explain that "The Big Surprise" that we're talking about was the name of a television quiz show.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, it was a television quiz show, "The Big Surprise." It was a spin-off of a successful television quiz show, before the whole thing came tumbling down because they ruined really a very wonderful, almost worthwhile, even educational experiment by making arrangements with the contestants according to their photogenic ability, and then feeding them answers; and finally engaging celebrities, who obviously didn't know any answers, and coaching them; and those celebrities produced some comedy of a highly dubious nature, and that was supposed to be a quiz. But it began as a very interesting experiment. Nothing new about asking questions and getting answers. At first it wasn't a success at all, and then they started the. . . . It was first on the radio, "The \$64 Question," (that even entered the language: "The \$64 question," not \$64,000). But then of



course, with the inflation, they raised the ante until it became "The \$64,000 Question," and then it became big business. People who would not listen to any kind of educational program listened to this extraordinary drama or comedy of people, seemingly people in their own standing, making money. I must say that I listened to some of these programs, and they sounded terribly silly to me; the questions were too easy, too elementary, at least for my knowledge, or else they were completely pointless, like crossword puzzles.

Well, anyway, the point in their program, beginning with "The \$64,000 Question," in which I did not participate, was to ask irrelevant questions of people who are not specialists in any particular category. Well, anyway, it so happened that the advertising agency that was auditioning people who might do well on TV, they were alerted to the fact that I exist and that I have all kinds of knowledge, not necessarily related to music. And then there was an article in the Baltimore Sun while I was teaching at the Peabody Conservatory [of Music] in Baltimore; the headline was, "He Found the Record Wrong, So He Changed the Record" (meaning that I made all those corrections in my dictionaries and so forth). Well, this article was brought to the attention of that advertising agency. As a matter of fact, it was brought to their attention by my own daughter, who was connected with some popular magazines for which she



wrote articles. So she had friends in the advertising agency that produced these shows, and they asked her whether she knew someone who would know a lot of things about a lot of nothings and who would not freeze up on TV, who had no stage fright. Well, this is me. See, whatever I am, and whatever I know or I don't know, I don't freeze up, and I don't have any stage fright. On the contrary, when I'm on the stage, I get excited and things come up to my mind that I didn't even realize were there in the first place.

Well, anyway, I was auditioned, and I was asked whether I would be willing. So I said, "Why not?" So the person who was in charge--that person happened to be a sister of Leonard Bernstein--she asked me whether I had any kind of feeling about appearing on the stage. I said, "Well, I've been on the stage since my childhood and I certainly was not afraid of any kind of stage. If I fail, so I fail." I said I failed so many times in so many fields that I was completely unconcerned. Well, it was explained to me then that the questions were to be asked about all kinds of things except my profession, that is, except music. That suited me fine because it was more interesting. Then there was a discussion of what kind of category I would select. Well, I am a movie buff, so I suggested movies. Okay, so this was my first category, the movies. Since the show was sponsored by the Encyclopaedia Britannica, I read the article on the





movies in the Encyclopaedia Britannica very carefully, and then I read some other articles. Then when I came to the show at NBC--it was broadcast at NBC in Radio City--it transpired that the widow of Clark Gable was a specialist in the theater, so she was talking about the theater and also about the movies. So my category didn't fit. So I proposed myself to appear in no category whatsoever, but rather in the category of misinformation, that they would feed me information and I would supply the correct information. Well, that was perfect, except, I repeat, no musical questions whatsoever. So that was very challenging, and naturally I accepted. And I appeared at my first show, which was rather easy, because I knew where they were getting their questions, from a book entitled Popular Fallacies, which was published in England, and then some other books of the same or similar nature. So among popular fallacies, I read that it is commonly assumed that New York City is the capital of the United States. (I don't know by whom it is commonly assumed, [laughter] but anyway. . . .) So this is incorrect, and Washington, D.C., is the capital of the United States. Silly things like that. But I was always a reader of Ripley's Believe It or Not, and some of those things were funny, so I was really interested in this sort of thing.

This "Big Surprise," as I said, was a spin-off of "The



\$64,000 Question," except that the scale was a little bit different. First question, \$100; and \$200, the second question; the third question, \$300; the fourth question, there was a quantum leap to \$1,000; then, \$2,000, \$3,000; and then \$10,000, \$20,000 and \$30,000; and finally \$100,000. (So it was actually more than "The \$64,000 Question.") And it was broadcast on Tuesday night. But you had to answer all the questions for each session: if you failed in one, then you were out, which defeated several people, including the widow of Clark Gable. She couldn't name the play in which Clark Gable appeared for the first time on Broadway, which was very strange, since she was already married to him and knew it. There were people--I realized that people did lose their composure or self-possession and suddenly didn't know something that they knew very well.

BERTONNEAU: Was this being shot in front of a live audience?

SLONIMSKY: Oh, yes, it was shot in front of a live audience. There was a Gilbert and Sullivan specialist who failed on the question that I could answer at once, the name of the sweetheart of the sailor in [H.M.S.] Pinafore. So I knew it was Josephine, but he just didn't know! I mean, he knew, but this was this business of stage fright. Well, as I said, with me it was the opposite; I mean, things that I knew vaguely suddenly sprang to the surface of my consciousness, and I could do better before the klieg lights than I could



do otherwise.

Nevertheless, some of the early questions were rather difficult. One question I remember very well, because I would have failed had I not been attracted by a name that seemed to be like a misspelling of the common name Edward. It was Eadweard, Eadweard Muybridge, the photographer who made the first--not the motion picture but a sequence of stills proving that a galloping horse at some moments has all four legs off the ground. And this was one of the questions. I mean, the question was, "Is it true that a galloping horse never leaves the ground?" "No, it is not true," my answer was, "It does leave the ground." And then the companion question was who was the photographer that proved it. Now, as a matter of fact, it was unfair, because it wasn't misinformation; it was information. But as I say, I was attracted by the fact, reading the Encyclopaedia Britannica article on the movies, I'm conscious of misprints and all kinds of typos, and here I found E-A-D-W-E-A-R-D, and I thought it was an error. But anyway, it attracted my attention. The name of Muybridge also registered. As a matter of fact he was a very famous photographer, and lots of people know his name; but not all know that he was the one that proved this business about galloping horses, that he demonstrated it for [Leland] Stanford, governor of California, in 1892. Well, anyway, so fortunately I knew



that answer. And then there were all kinds of questions of a similar. . . .

So I went through \$100, and \$200, and \$300, and \$1,000, and then \$2,000, all in one session, because the questions were really easy. Then they became a little harder, and for me the question was, I was already in possession of \$2,000; why should I risk everything by going further? Well, anyway, I said to myself, "Well, as they say in Monte Carlo, 'Va banque'"--either the entire bank, the entire take, or nothing. And then by that time it was also a question of vanity. I wanted to prove to myself and to my friends that I really could do it. And I certainly could do it; I certainly was loquacious enough.

Well, Mike Wallace was the master of ceremonies--that was before he became so famous; he was just a master of ceremonies--and he didn't seem to know much about the whole thing. He read the questions, and that's all. He certainly could not supply the answers, and he was not supposed to. Except that he kept asking me to, "Do you want to go to the next step?" So I said, "Yes," and so we went on--two, three sessions--and I reached the sum of \$3,000. Now, that was real money for doing absolutely nothing. Then there were categories, like, for instance, misquotations, which also were very familiar to me. For instance, "Music can soothe the savage breast," not "the savage beast"--this is very





common. Or, "to gild the lily" is wrong; it's "to paint the lily" (to gild, refined gold). I was familiar with all those very common misquotations. So I passed through that with no difficulty whatsoever.

By the third or the fourth session, several contestants fell off, and I was practically alone in the field. So Mike Wallace began making a gesture, rotating his finger, and so did other prompters, meaning "Go on, just fill in the show." Because he had nothing. That was very easy for me to do, to talk. Mike Wallace asked me, "What is wrong with music?" Then, of course, that was very easy. So I suggested certain questions myself. I said, "Now, who composed 'Ta-ta, tee-ta/ta-ta, tee-ta--ta ta tee ta/tatata tee ta'?" Well, so everybody says, "This is Bizet, Carmen from Bizet." I said, "Wrong, Bizet never composed it. Bizet borrowed this tune from a collection of Spanish songs by an obscure composer named Sebastián Yradier." So I began suggesting the questions, and this time I could suggest questions from the musical field.

Well, anyway, by the time I reached \$10,000, I became famous--I mean, famous because people were watching, and I was there in the limelight already for four weeks, and I was on top. (I mean, all others failed in their own categories). And then, as I say, I knew fame. [laughter] I remember that I was living in Boston, and by that time the



elevator man, all my neighbors, the bank tellers, my barber, and everybody knew and asked me questions. [laughter] I remember when I reached \$10,000, a little girl, four or five, who lived in the same house, I saw her in the elevator, and she looked at me and said, "Are you going for twenty?" You know, she was already familiar with all this business. So I did go for twenty, and then I was more and more famous. And I realized for the first time that this kind of fame is not always welcome. For instance, going to a barber shop and suddenly realizing that all barbers and all manicurists stopped working and began whispering something to each other and looking at me. And I felt uncomfortable. I was taking my laundry to the Chinese laundry, and they already began looking at me. And then I continued to teach at the conservatory; well, I couldn't teach at all because the only question asked by my class was about the quiz show and not about Mozart or Beethoven.

And so it went until I reached the "plateau," as the expression was, of \$30,000. Well, by that time the question was whether I should try for \$100,000 or just be satisfied with \$30,000. I consulted my daughter, who was twenty years old at the time. She was very wise in those things, so she suggested to play it by ear. In the meantime, I realized that even the sponsors were interested in my winning. It was sponsored by Revlon, and the business manager for Revlon



made a special trip to New York from Los Angeles to see how it goes and to try to persuade me to go on. And also I had a call from the TV Guide, and they were sending two photographers to have a cover feature about how it feels to win \$100,000. But by that time I decided not to go for \$100,000 because I had that \$30,000 practically in my pocket, and I said to myself if I lose all this simply because of a few silly questions or a desire to make more money. . . . It wouldn't be so much more because the government would have taken practically one-half of it, but still it was the kind of money I never saw in my life, for any of my books, appearances, or anything at all. And of course there was this element of . . . not vanity, the satisfaction that people who treated me with a certain disdain as just a person who, you know, writes books and plays concerts, but doesn't go over big. . . . Schirmer, for instance, my publisher. He was very difficult to reach, I mean, the real big Gustav Schirmer [III], who presided over the business of Schirmer publishers. And all of a sudden I found that when I just dropped in, that all sales personnel practically mobbed me asking me for autographs and all kinds of things, and also telling me that Mr. Schirmer ordered that the moment I appear in the store that he should be notified, that he would drop all the appointments and get me into conference. So Schirmer



told me that this was very important that I should continue. It was even very important for Schirmer as my publisher. (You see, by that time I was working on Baker's Dictionary, the fifth edition of Baker's Dictionary.) And so on and so forth. Quite amusing.

But I decided not to go for \$100,000; I'd be satisfied with \$30,000. Then Mike Wallace asked me whether I would want to try to answer the final questions: there were seven different questions, and I had to answer them all. So he asked me. Well, they were the silliest questions of the entire quiz.

BERTONNEAU: This was after you decided. . . ?

SLONIMSKY: After I decided not to go. I said I was not going, and so there was a gasp of disappointment. But I was not going. I particularly pitied those two photographers from the TV Guide who came for nothing. Because I was not to tell anybody that I was not going to try for \$100,000. I mean, in consultation with my family and friends, I just decided not to take this wild chance, particularly since I knew that some very canny professor of the University of Chicago was preparing seven questions which were practically unanswerable, or so I believed. At least, this was my impression of what Beverly Bernstein told me. She was--I called her director of brainwashing because she was sort of in charge of this whole situation. She said to me it would





be sheer folly for me to try for \$100,000 and possibly lose \$30,000. And I agreed with her. Anyway, by that time, even I was getting nervous, simply because I didn't know how I would stand this kind of loss for nothing.

Well, anyway, so I said no. And then he asked the several questions. One of them was, "Why is Red Square in Moscow called Red Square?" Now, of course, people who are very ignorant say because they are Reds, you know, the Red Revolution. It is nothing of the sort. Red Square is called Red Square because the word red in Russian has a secondary meaning which means beautiful; so it's just Beautiful Square. It has been Beautiful Square for 300 years, ever since it was named. So I explained it. But they had a different answer; you see, Mike Wallace read his answer. He said, "No, our source" (meaning the Encyclopaedia Britannica) "says because it's because originally the houses were of red bricks." Now, it's simply not so, because there weren't any brick houses in Moscow 300 years ago when it was organized. Well, so I disagreed, and there was a conference, and they decided in my favor. But, of course, all this was to no purpose; it was just an exercise in futility, because I already said that I wouldn't go for the \$100,000. Then there was a very funny question; it was this: "When a child is born and doesn't breathe, the doctor applies mouth-to-mouth respiration. Now, what gas does he exhale?" Now,



obviously carbon dioxide. But how can carbon dioxide revive a child? Well, the answer is that it doesn't matter what the nature of the gas is; it's just to get the lungs going. That's the only reason. But many people still believe that it has to be oxygen, which of course is nonsense. So this I had to figure out all by myself. And then I found out that that very week there was an article on this very subject in Time magazine, which I had in my pocket, but I hadn't read yet, you see. It was applied to monkeys, because, of course sometimes monkeys have babies that are stillborn and then they have to be revived by the same method. And there were other questions, all of them either easy or easy to figure out, or easy to figure out by bluff, such as that mouth-to-mouth resuscitation; well, I just figured out what it had to be.

Well, anyway, so obviously I didn't get my \$100,000, but I got \$30,000, which was certainly plenty, and I made front pages. On one front page in the Boston Herald--of course, Boston was my hometown--the headline said, "Loses \$70,000 in Three Minutes, Has No Regrets." Well, it's just like saying "Loses a million dollars by not buying the right lottery ticket" or "by not betting on the right horse." [laughter] So, anyway, I was quite satisfied with whatever I got, and I was still very famous for another two weeks.



Then I decided to take a brief vacation, to fly to Florida, where I had some friends. So I called up American Airlines--that was around Christmas time--and they said no, absolutely nothing for Christmas, nothing before January somethingth. I said, "Well, that's too bad." And then there was a pause, and the man said, "Are you Mr. Smulsky?" Of course he couldn't say "Slonimsky"; he said "Slumsky" or something like that. "I think I heard you on TV. Were you on 'The Big Surprise'?" So I said, "So I was." "Oh, just wait a minute." Well, anyway, I got my seat on the plane. Then I realized that this was real fame. I was not even sure that I liked it particularly, because since I was and still remain an unregenerate intellectual, I felt that this was really insulting to one's feeling as a thinking human being, because it's this sort of thing that makes me important and famous and people suddenly begin to defer to me. Actually I went to a restaurant with my daughter in New York, and there were no tables. So my daughter said, "Oh, let's not wait, let's go to some other place." And the maître d' looked at me and actually rushed to me and said, "You are Mr. Slonimsky. We'll have a table for you." I mean, this sort of thing--almost legendary. I mean, the kind of stuff you see in the movies. But I had a taste of it for a few weeks, or even longer than that. So this was the story. It was twenty years ago, and, of course, it's



long forgotten. But still people are amazed to find out that a person whom they know--I mean, people, particularly in my profession, musicologists and so forth, even the editor of a musicological magazine who found out from another person that I was on that TV (he personally became tremendously interested in it)--even people who are immersed in intellectualism, they still regard this as something very extra. They told me that my friends in the Library of Congress actually organized a hookup because this last program coincided with a special concert at the Library of Congress. So they had to have a special telephone relay to find out whether I was going for \$100,000 or not. Well, I was not going. But I certainly got enough. And the ripples lasted for several years. It's only now--of course, twenty years make a difference, and there isn't much left of my \$30,000. The government took \$11,000 of this right on the spot. [laughter] The IRS people were practically waiting there to collect. Well, there's some of it left, even until this day. This is the only time when I made big money, but not with my books, unfortunately. But still it was an experience.

BERTONNEAU: I'd like to ask you about some songs you wrote in the late 1940s. Of the works of yours that I've heard, these are perhaps the most interesting of all, those New England epitaphs [Gravestones of Hancock, New Hampshire].





SLONIMSKY: Yes. Well, you know, I have some kind of a morbid taste in those matters. I'm attracted by things that are eccentric and sometimes by things that are even ghoulish and morbid in a sort of an unhealthy manner. For instance, I have made a blowup picture of the skull of Bach. (Bach's body was exhumed in 1895 and wonderful photographs were made by the professor of anatomy at the University of Leipzig. When I found out that these photographs existed in the book, needless to say I immediately secured copies and had them blown up. So I have Bach's skull, which I propose to use as an illustration in my forthcoming book, Lectionary of Music, instead of the regular picture of Bach.) Well, this is a part of my humor, morbid humor, which is not so uncommon. As I understand, Robert Benchley, the humorist, was a regular subscriber to the funeral directors' magazine called The Casket. [laughter] The Casket. He was a subscriber, and I don't know what kind of satisfaction he derived from it, but he somehow enjoyed it, enjoyed reading about the morticians' convention at the end of the war when the question was raised about casualties possibly produced by atomic bombing, and they said that they had to be prepared for it and they had to step up production and so forth. So now this is to me--naturally, it's repellent, but to some humorists of that type, of the New Yorker type, it has some morbid attraction. Well, I don't go so far,



but I am interested in things that are perhaps morbid but, at the same time, artistic. And after all, in this respect, I have a very long legacy from the Middle Ages: even the student song "Gaudeamus igitur" makes all kinds of morbid references to death, "Let's be joyful until we get buried in the earth" ("nos habebit humus"), you know, all that sort of thing.

So during the summer of 1945, I spent that summer in a small village in New Hampshire. And there was one of those wonderful old-fashioned New England cemeteries. I went there and I saw those inscriptions, which, incidentally, are published, the inscriptions on that cemetery. There is a book which comprises practically all inscriptions, particularly inscriptions in verse, which was quite a trend in the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century; then they were abandoned. I remember several of them, like, well, there's one that is a classic, which is repeated in various versions:

Stop, my friends, as you go by.  
As you are now, so once was I.  
As I am now, so you will be.  
Prepare for death and follow me.

This sort of thing. I thought it would be a wonderful idea to set it to music. Naturally I set it to music using a nursery rhyme, a very morbid nursery rhyme, "Worms crawl in, worms crawl out," and so forth--Da da, da dum/ da da, da dum/



da da da da da/da da, da dum. So I used this theme, and I made it atonal and polytonal, and I composed this ["Stop, My Friends, As You Pass By"]. Then I picked up other songs, some of them very lyrical. There was one by a bereaved husband to his wife, Lydia. It said, "Here Lydia lies, alas, forever," and this was quite a little poetic verse. So I set that to music ["Lydia"], obviously in the Lydian mode, since it was Lydia. [laughter] I mean, this is the kind of private joke that, of course, I'm addicted to. And then I found out that this bereaved husband married another woman almost immediately after the first wife died and buried her, you know, because they were all dying in childbirth around 1830. And then there were several Civil War casualties. So I set them to music with a combination of "Yankee Doodle" and "Dixie" and so on. Each song was in the style of the period. Well, so this made a very nice set. And the songs have been sung quite a lot, no longer. But I'm not ashamed of those songs at all. I used----in the accompaniment, at least, of those songs--some of my ideas that I fully developed in my Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns. And I don't regard these songs as an entire waste of energy and time. They have some validity, at least to me--not anything of lasting value but, as I say, some validity.

BERTONNEAU: When you were talking about some of your other



music, didn't you use the words "serious joking," or "serious jesting"?

SLONIMSKY: Yes, jesting seriously. Well, after all, serious jesting also has a very ancient and honorable tradition. Hamlet made jokes about the skull of Yorick, and, of course, Shakespeare is full of such serious jokes. And I think that jokes, if they are seriously meant, discover some element of truth.

BERTONNEAU: Another composition which was much more recent, which is also sort of jesting, is the Möbius Strip Tease for a singer and pianist.

SLONIMSKY: Well, yes. Now, the Möbius strip of course is one of those strange involuted figures that are familiar to some art lovers from the drawings of the Dutch painter [M.C.] Escher. They are supposed to be--I mean, they are one-sided surfaces that become two-sided when you arrange them by binding together the ends, but not in the same orbit, so to speak, but with a twist of  $180^\circ$ , so that it becomes a perpetual ribbon. In fact, it is of importance in mathematics. I liked that Möbius strip for a good many years and finally found out who [August] Möbius was. He was a German mathematician in the first half of the nineteenth century. I have his early photograph, which I found in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, in the new edition. Well, I thought that it would be a wonderful idea to compose





a piece of music on that strip, which could then be rotated. Of course, it is not an exact rotation; there is twisting, constant twisting before it comes to the beginning. But I claim that it was really the first true perpetual canon, because there are perpetual canons that end at the beginning and vice versa, but this is not perpetual because you go to the end and then you simply start from the beginning. It's no more perpetual than a repeat section in a minuet. But here again, with the species of a serious joke, I composed a piece which I claim to be the first perpetual canon ever written. For two voices. And I actually had it performed by two singers. I made up two Möbius strips in the manner of lampshades that were rotated around the singers' heads, and they read the notes as the strips rotated. Now, I added tease for the obvious reason, because it's Möbius strip, so I made it Möbius Strip Tease. And the words were more or less nonsensical and yet, like much nonsense, made some sense. I said, "Oh, Möbius" (I wrote this verse) "Oh, Möbius, I adore your glorious Möbius strip" (and so on and so forth). "It's one-sided, and yet it's two-sided; it returns to its origin." I don't remember the exact verse. Well, anyway, I had it published in an avant-garde magazine. . . .



TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE TWO

APRIL 7, 1977

BERTONNEAU: Möbius Strip Tease.

SLONIMSKY: Möbius Strip Tease. So it is a composition of sorts. And, as I said, I had it published in the far-out magazine called Source published here in California. I really regard it as an honor, in a way. I sort of infiltrated into the avant-garde movement, to which I basically don't belong because avant-garde musicians are supposed to be very solemn--at least they are solemn; they regard their trade solemnly--and I obviously don't fit the description. But, nevertheless, I published in fact two compositions in Source magazine. Möbius Strip Tease was one.

Now, my latest compositions are a series of Minitudes--that is, mini-études, but I compressed this word into minitudes. And some of the Minitudes also have strange titles, like "Quaquaversal Quarks"--quaquaversal meaning moving every which way, and quarks are subatomic particles (it's an invented word taken from Finnegans Wake, by James Joyce).

BERTONNEAU: You have an interest in science, don't you?

SLONIMSKY: Well, I have an interest in science to the extent that I subscribe to Scientific American, and that I am interested in numbers, and that I feel that there are certain combinations in numbers that have a certain bearing



on combinations of musical notes. See, when I was very young, I entered the mathematical faculty at the University of St. Petersburg in Russia. I never completed my courses because of the Revolution and everything, but still I was interested, and I maintained this interest until this day. I used to amuse myself by memorizing unnecessary things such as the logarithmic table. [laughter] I still remember the logarithms of prime numbers, from which I can extrapolate logarithms of multiples. And I can calculate rather quickly in my head, so I can produce an impression on innocent people.

BERTONNEAU: I heard once on a radio broadcast that you did a couple of years ago a kind of mathematical trick where someone would give you their birthdate and then you would tell them what day of the week they were born.

SLONIMSKY: Oh, yes. Well, this I . . .

BERTONNEAU: This is another example of . . .

SLONIMSKY: Well, this is really very--I mean, there's nothing to it. I could teach anyone to do it in five minutes. Needless to say, I'm not the inventor of this particular type of calculation. And there are several, several methods. I will certainly not use our oral history time on that. But it does require the ability to perform several very simple arithmetical calculations, about eight or nine, very quickly. And that takes, I mean, some kind of ability of a very



rudimentary nature, but still some people just cannot do it. Now, for instance, I'll give you an idea. The cycle of days of the week are repeated every twenty-eight years, because of course the leap years even out after twenty-eight years, being seven multiplied by four. So in order to get to a starting point, you have to subtract multiples of twenty-eight from the given year in order to reduce it. But there are some people who cannot do that, you know; they cannot find multiples of twenty-eight, and when they find them they cannot subtract. [laughter] And then you have to know which month has which index; meaning, if, let's say, you start with March, number one March (so as to avoid the leap years), then you must know that if March is one meaning Monday, then April is four and May is six and so forth. Then at all times, whenever you calculate, you dismiss multiples of seven all the time. Now, as I say, it requires a certain agility of mind. But I know that some people just lose their way even after a few calculations. I think now I can do it in about four or five seconds, but I used to do it in a fraction of a second. There is nothing to it, obviously.

But sometimes I can fool people by finding out about their birthdays by accident. For instance, I remember I was in a group of people scientifically minded in some events, some people who believed in ESP and that kind of nonsense. And I said that I have ESP. I had overheard a





remark of the hostess that their child was having a birthday on a Friday, and she was going to be eleven. So I immediately absorbed this, and then I said, "Oh, ESP--I could tell you, if you remember, on what day of the week your child was born." The hostess said, "This is impossible. How can you know?" So I produced the answer. And of course, this immediately established my reputation as a clairvoyant. This sort of thing.

I do remember numbers, and doing my dictionaries, of course, I remember I don't know how many thousands of completely unnecessary birthdays and death days. Now, it's all right if I remember the exact date of the death of Beethoven, or birth (well, the exact day of birth is not known; the exact date of baptism is known), or Mozart, or somebody; but why should I remember the birthdays of people who are merely names in dictionaries? Sometimes I remember them simply because it took me long to find out what the exact dates are.

Those things are sometimes a nuisance, almost as much of a nuisance as absolute pitch (which I have, perfect pitch) because then it bothers me to know in what key certain machinery is going. For instance, I know my electric typewriter is in B-flat. But practically all machinery is in B-flat.



BERTONNEAU: What's your cuckoo clock?

SLONIMSKY: My cuckoo clock is in B-flat, too. Sometimes it helps. For instance, when I boil my water in the kettle: this is a whistling kettle, and I know that when the kettle reaches C-sharp in alto, then the water is boiled properly. [laughter] Also, in old days, you know, when I took the streetcar, way back in Russia, I could almost exactly figure out how fast we were going and how soon I will get to wherever I was going, because I knew that the high note of the sound produced by the streetcar corresponded to a certain speed. I knew that it never went above a certain note, and so forth and so on. So this is amusing, of course, but there's nothing miraculous about it.

That's why I'm so skeptical about any claims of ESP or clairvoyance or something like that. I have a lot of tricks of this nature. I mean, I'm no magician; I don't have this kind of prestidigitating quality that is required for it, even though I can play my scales on the piano very fast. But this is a different type of being a prestidigitator than managing magic tricks. But I can do the magic tricks, which are basically deceptions, some of them clever deceptions, which I learned, none of which I invented. But I can do things like, for instance, you play a certain note on the violin in the next room, and I tell you the exact distance in fractions of an inch between the position of your finger



on the string and the bridge of the string. This produces an impression, even on professional players. Now, of course, I don't see that violin--the violinist is playing behind a closed door in the next room--but I don't have to see the violin, because I have perfect pitch. So I know--let's say, let's take a simple example--when the violinist plays A on the E string. All right, so I know that from E to A is a fourth, and that the ratio of vibrations for a perfect fourth is four to three; and I know that the length of the violin string is thirteen and a half inches, and that in order to produce that fourth I have to cut off one-fourth of the string and let three-fourths of the string vibrate. So I do some very elementary calculations, multiplying thirteen and a half by three-fourths, and I give the exact answer. Then somebody takes a ruler and finds that it's exactly right. Now, this is quite a trick. And if a person doesn't have absolute pitch, or even if a person has perfect pitch but doesn't know that intervals have a certain ratio or doesn't know the length of the violin string or any of those elements--I mean, there are excellent musicians, simply violinists, who can't tell you what the length of the violin string is. So it's one of those things. So I used to amuse myself by exhibiting these kinds of tricks, which of course are of no value, except for entertainment.

And I still remember how to do all those things in



numbers and so forth, because once I memorize something with a certain interest in it, then I never forget it. When I was in school, I memorized the entire text of [Alexander] Pushkin's Eugene Onegin; I think I remember it until this day. And I did the same thing with some operas, which I memorized in their entirety. And also I think I--at least some of the Russian operas, and perhaps Faust and Carmen, I could probably, with a little practice, replay them in their entirety. But I don't know whether this is of any more importance than the feats performed by so-called "idiot savants." But idiot savants remember, memorize things like baseball scores, which I don't memorize and I don't remember because I'm not interested; it so happens that I'm not interested in that. Still I feel that those claims, even for idiot savants, are exaggerated. But I am interested in all exhibitions of extraordinary cases of memory and so forth. I found in my investigations that stories of perfect memory in music, or even ability to tell wrong notes under any circumstances, or the ability to recognize chords, even when you just sit on the keyboard and it is technically and acoustically impossible to tell all the notes, and particularly stories about remarkable memory-- I just don't believe them. I mean, I would have to investigate them just as I would have to investigate claims of clairvoyance. But I can do things that would approximate





those feats. And I don't believe that they are so uncommon, these memory tricks. Well, they are not tricks. If you are an attentive musician and if you play a piece once or twice, you'll memorize it, or you can even memorize a piece by listening to it only once or twice, or even by looking at the score. I can memorize a comparatively easy piano piece by just looking at the page for five minutes, and I'll play it for you having never seen that page before. But there's nothing remarkable about it. It's very common. It's also true that some very remarkable musicians cannot do it, but it has nothing to do with real musicianship.

BERTONNEAU: Let me ask you to project a little bit into the future now. I know you're working on a book called Lectionary. That's your next big project.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, it is a terrific project, and I already have 1,800 pages, nearly 2,000 pages. Now, the complete title is Lectionary of Musical Information, Instruction, and Entertainment.

BERTONNEAU: This is a kind of unusual word, lectionary.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. This is better than dictionary because lectionary means something to be read, while dictionary is something to be said. Lectionary was a perfectly good word in the seventeenth century, when lectionaries were published, in the sense of dictionary, something to be read. But now the word lectionary has changed its meaning and has become



narrowed to the church use, lections--that is, lessons; that is, readings from the Bible. So a lection is a reading from the Bible between sections of liturgy. But I'm trying to revive it as in the sense of something to be read because there is no reason why it should be confined to the liturgical meaning. Etymologically, lectionary means exactly what it seems to be, something to be read. I happened to be in New York when there was an exhibition of old dictionaries--not necessarily dictionaries but one of those omnibus books that contained information about all subjects. And there were those lectionaries published in the seventeenth century (of course, in French it would be lectionnaire). I spent some time looking at them--but I suddenly realized that this was a perfect word and a very good word to be revived in the sense of dictionary. When you look up lectionary in the dictionary, you find that it is confined to ecclesiastical usage. But then I looked up the Century Cyclopedia, which is an old encyclopedia, one of my favorites, published in 1900 here in the United States--it's just absolutely wonderful: twelve or thirteen volumes, beautifully printed, not now available (you can't buy it) but it has become one of my favorite dictionaries whenever I have a chance to go to the library and do something else but research--and there I found the definition of lectionary as something to



be read, I mean, the original meaning. It didn't even say "obsolete" or "archaic"; most dictionaries say--one says, "a dictionary, a reading," and then it says, "obsolete in that sense." But it is not necessarily obsolete. So I hope I'll be able to revive it, and I hope no one will steal it from me before I publish my huge book.

Now, I started it as a sort of a little book for easy reading, and now it has grown into a monster. But I believe that monsters actually sell. Even from a commercial standpoint, it's better to publish a monster than a light book that is not satisfactory and not complete. I've done pretty well with my monsters, such as Music Since 1900.

BERTONNEAU: What will the Lectionary contain?

SLONIMSKY: Well, it will contain everything. That's the point. It will contain biographies of probably two or three thousand musicians, but in capsule form. So I will not enumerate the keys of all of Beethoven's symphonies, but I will describe in a few words each symphony. And I will also give an idea of Beethoven's life, including some personal elements--that he was never married, and he was always romantically attached to various women whom he knew, but apparently was timid or simply incapable and so forth. And then about Tchaikovsky I will mention the fact that in desperation he did get married, and this was of course a disaster, because when his wife sat on his lap, he



thought it was the most terrible thing that happened to him. He ran out of his apartment and then finally found a friend of his, a male who had similar tastes, and became consoled in his abnormal situation. So this sort of thing. Well, I will not be gross about it, but I will say something. And I will also try to find amusing elements in every composer's life.

Then I will have all operas that I could possibly track down, not just famous operas, but all operas of Donizetti, Bellini, and of course Mozart and Beethoven, all Russian operas that I could ever trace--again, not just famous operas, but every single opera by Rimsky-Korsakov and operas that are very little known.

[I will have] all ballets of any kind of significance, and then all name symphonies. By name symphonies, I mean not just First Symphony (I can't enter First Symphony), but let's say Jupiter Symphony (which of course is a nickname, but it's still something, a person might want to look up Jupiter Symphony), or Unfinished Symphony, or whatever, again not confining myself to the classics but also to the less-known composers, Swedes, Danes, and all kinds of people. Certain things particularly attract my attention when those symphonies or operas are unusual in some respects--for instance, an oratorio that could be played simultaneously with a comic opera or separately, so there were two things





at once. [laughter] I mean, some strange Italian thought that it was a good idea, so he had two operas, one comic opera and one sacred oratorio. Things like that. There are numerous examples of this nature.

Then all terms covering just everything: all dance forms, and so on and so forth. I believe that I'll have 2,000 operas, and of course very brief description of each, but still I'll have the exact date of first performances, stuff like that.

Exotic instruments galore. I will make a particular emphasis on exotic symphonies. I have numerous sources to use.

Also expression marks, unusual expression marks, including expression marks in French used by Scriabin, like extatique and so forth, or those used by Mahler, also very strange.

And all terms in all languages, some of them even in Russian. For instance, the Russian word for a hurdy-gurdy is sharmanka, which is of interest to me because I found out relatively recently that sharmanka is a Russian word which comes from the French song called "Charmante Cathérine," which was a popular tune that reached Russia early in the nineteenth century. So when hurdy-gurdies (or street organs, or barrel organs) originated in France and spread all over Europe very



quickly early in the nineteenth century, they played that tune, "Charmante Cathérine," and therefore the Russian word for hurdy-gurdy is sharmanka. And Stravinsky, in his ballet Petrouchka, imitated the sharmanka, the Russian hurdy-gurdy. And this sort of thing fascinates me.

Or the origin of "Chopsticks."

BERTONNEAU: What's the origin of "Chopsticks"?

SLONIMSKY: Well, the origin of "Chopsticks" was most extraordinary. Almost it was a case of spontaneous generation. In about 1877, it started in Germany, and it was called "Kotelettenpolka." It wasn't a waltz; it was a polka, "Cutlet Polka," and it was to be played with the edges of the palm of the hand. A little girl who was the daughter of a servant of Borodin, the Russian composer, wanted to play the piano for him. He was surprised that she could play, so she said yes, she could play. So she sat down at the piano and played dada dada deeda dada deeda da da. . . . And Borodin became quite enchanted with this very simple tune. So he proposed to his friends to write variations on it. So a set of variations were written. And then they sent this list to Liszt, who also contributed a variation. Of course, it wasn't composed by anyone. I mean, like all those celebrated tunes. . . .

One of my students said that the most celebrated composer of all times was Anon, because so many songs are



anonymous. And it is true. It's one of those mysteries why the most popular songs of all time of all nations are anonymous, meaning that, well, someone must have composed them, particularly in recent times, but still they are anonymous.

Now, all those melodies will be tabulated in the Lectionary. So if you want to find out who wrote "Ochi Chornya" or, for that matter, "Maxixe" (da dada da da dada, da dah dah dada), I can provide the answer because those things finally seem to be well established. And it's usually the most obscure composers who write those very celebrated. . . . "Happy Birthday to You" was written by a couple of school-marms, late in the nineteenth century. It's very seldom that a real popular tune turns out to be the work of a master. Not even Beethoven has contributed a tune that everybody knows. "Dark Eyes," everybody knows; "Ach du lieber Augustin," everybody knows all over the earth. Now, of course, many people know the tune of the finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, but not everybody (I mean, if you go into the masses, they will not know). But they will know some tunes that have become universal. This is a very interesting point. And I bring a lot of those points out in the Lectionary. And then, of course, there will be regular articles about historical styles in music and so forth.

BERTONNEAU: When do you expect it to reach the shelves?



SLONIMSKY: Well, I don't know. You see, I expect to take my manuscript to the publishers--they will probably be horrified (when I go to New York next week) because of the length of it. At first I thought of a small book, a sort of a nice little pocketbook for amateur musicians. But now it has grown into something immense. But my contention is that monsters of a book sell because then the buyer feels that he has acquired everything.

And also, the illustrations will be very unusual. For instance, I will use the famous picture that is used by the manufacturers of a perfume named Tabu, showing a mustachioed violinist kissing a pianist. Incidentally, I was always interested why the violinist keeps his violin in his hand, and yet no bow. Apparently he had the presence of mind to deposit his bow on the piano or someplace, so why didn't he deposit his violin? [laughter] Presumably it's a very precious violin, so. . . . And also the position of the girl who plays the piano is quite unnatural. And then there is a nineteenth-century print called Awakening of a Conscience, when a girl who is being coached by a bearded, apparently German pianist at the piano suddenly realizes that he's touching her and that it's terribly dangerous; so she rises from the piano with an expression on her face that describes absolute horror at the possible danger to her innocence. [laughter] So [there will be] this sort of





illustrations, which will also be quite different from the usual illustrations. Or an illustration for a violin pupil who--a rather famous violinist was asked how it was that he practiced so much when he was a boy, who forced him. So he said, "My mother told me." "Well, why did you follow her instructions." He said, "She told me she would break my arm if I don't." Well, so I have a picture of the mother actually threatening her child with a violin to break his arm if he doesn't practice. I mean stuff like that. So this and the skull of Bach and that perfume advertisement and so on and so forth will immediately show to whoever wants to buy this book that it's not the usual run of a music book.

BERTONNEAU: I have a kind of ending question that I want to ask you. Maybe it's a silly question, but it's one that I guess everybody who's connected with music eventually gets asked at a cocktail party or something. The question is this: If you were stranded on a desert island--[laughter] don't you know what I'm going to ask?--and you could only have music of one composer with you, what composer would that be?

SLONIMSKY: But you see, the situation is an impossibility, because in what form would I have that music? In the form of records, in the form of a printed page, or in what form? So I would carry that music, let's say Tchaikovsky--not that



Tchaikovsky is my favorite composer, but I grew up on Tchaikovsky; I mean, Tchaikovsky is just like something that I knew as a child. He's a friend. I know every note of Tchaikovsky's piano works and operas and so forth. So it would be Tchaikovsky. But if you say, "Well, what would I do on a desert island?" So I would play over the entire score of Eugene Onegin, and the entire score of Pique-Dame, then the Seasons, then the Pathétique Symphony, the Trio, Piano Trio of Tchaikovsky and so forth--so I will exhaust the repertory. Then if I don't remember certain passages, I will concentrate on those passages and try to remember. So this will keep me sane. But if you talk about recordings, then I would probably tire of listening to a recording. Even now I would probably look at the score rather than to listen to the recording.

Now, it's different from books. See, if it's books, then of course you can read them. However, if I could take scores, if that is the meaning of your question, then I would take Wagner's operas of which I know a little less and therefore I could keep discovering things. I would take all of them, a complete edition of all Wagner operas, and then I would learn, you see, because I would be interested in learning something. Because if it's a Tchaikovsky, then there would be no element of learning; there would be no discovery because I would know every



single note. I could possibly discover some variance in Tchaikovsky's operas. I would find some new element; I would realize that there is a whole-tone scale in a hidden form in a scene in The Queen of Spades, something like that. So this is the way I would operate. I would take those wonderful little pocket editions of Wagner's operas; they are very thick but they are very nourishing, and I love those old German editions, particularly old editions if I could get a hold of them.

BERTONNEAU: Well, thank you very, very much for talking so loquaciously for so long.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, well this is the one thing I can do: I can talk.

BERTONNEAU: Thank you very much.



TAPE NUMBER: IX [video session]

APRIL 9, 1977

BERTONNEAU: This [cat] is Mango, I think. She's been in the background for a long time, but now we get a chance to see her. Mango had a brother or a sister . . .

SLONIMSKY: A brother, called Papaya.

BERTONNEAU: . . . called Papaya, and he disappeared.

SLONIMSKY: Unfortunately.

BERTONNEAU: Well, I want to start by asking you a question that was suggested by a talk I heard you give one time.

This was a lecture on American music in which you suggested that someone ought to play a concert of very bad music just to give us a chance to understand how good the good music really was. Was that just a kind of capricious suggestion, or do you think maybe that would really serve a purpose?

SLONIMSKY: No, I think that bad music, if it's very bad, then it becomes artistic. See, just like satire: when in a satire the dialogue becomes simply ludicrous, then it's good satire; but if it's wishy-washy and not convincing, then it's not satire. And I have some pieces of bad music, some composed by myself, that are really marvelous in a way--not my own pieces because my pieces of deliberately bad music are not very good, because they are not genuinely bad. [laughter] You see, there has to be some authenticity in bad music, and for this we must search among innocents,





among composers or pianists who innocently believe that what they compose is great music and they feel something in their souls and so forth. Now, when I compose music, I don't feel anything in my soul, so the music is neither good nor bad, and it doesn't serve any purpose whatsoever.

BERTONNEAU: Have you deliberately collected examples of bad music?

SLONIMSKY: Oh, yes, I just adore them. A couple of years ago I got some samples of music by a German who had settled in St. Louis over 100 years ago. His name was Karl Kunkel, and he composed a piece called Alpine Storm, which was dedicated, if you please, "To my son, Ludwig Beethoven Kunkel." [laughter] Now, anybody who has a son whom he names Ludwig Beethoven Kunkel must be some sort of genius. And then I began playing the music, and it's a self-parody of the first magnitude. But of course he was truly convinced that he was composing great music. It was very programmatic. There was a storm evoked by some passages in the deepest bass, and then there were two or three birds, and everything, everything was thrown in. And that is good bad music. But really bad music, or bad good music, is the most intolerable product, because here you may see the poor composer who actually learned harmony and counterpoint and everything, and he composes something that could be good music if it were composed by Richard Strauss. And then of



course [laughter] you can remember that anecdote about Rossini, to whom an aspiring composer brought a funeral ode in memory of Meyerbeer, who died before Rossini. And Rossini played it and said, "Too bad it isn't Meyerbeer's funeral ode for you." So that's how it goes. [tape recorder turned off]

BERTONNEAU: It occurred to me that it wouldn't really be unfair to compare some of your music to some of that of Erik Satie. It has some of that same satirical sense. Do you think that is an okay comparison?

SLONIMSKY: I suppose that Erik Satie exercised some influence on everybody, on all of his younger contemporaries. But after all, Erik Satie didn't invent musical satire. In fact, Rossini's little piano pieces, which were not published until many years after his death, they have everything that Satie has. I'm not a particular admirer of Satie because there was too much verbiage in his music; that is, his music really depended on various humorous remarks in the score itself, and some of those remarks were not so humorous. But there's a general attitude of making music the subject of fun and games. And undoubtedly I was affected by Satie, as practically everybody, except religious composers--and even religious composers sometimes wrote music that contained jokes or irreverent references to important personages in the church. So I don't believe that there is any particular



connection. Besides, I was interested in my music to project some sort of technique. In my first published work, Studies in Black and White, the right hand plays on the white keys, the left hand plays on the black keys, and there isn't a dissonance in the carload, so to speak. That is, there is a technical device used, and if my music has any validity whatsoever, then it depends on those technical devices. I posit a certain idea, and I say I'm going to limit myself to a certain scale, to a certain combination of scales which ought to create a style of its own; at least so I believed. I cannot say that I am a totally unsuccessful composer, as some of my pieces are played once in a while, but I really do not rate as a composer. I was put on the map by Henry Cowell in his collection American Composers on American Music. He wrote an article about me, and I wrote an article about him in the same volume (and then there were articles on other American composers, of course, real American composers). Well, anyway, this put me on the map, so to speak. And also Cowell published my Studies in Black and White in his New Music Quarterly, which was specially intended for the publication of ultramodern music, as he put it, because he said that ultramodern music didn't have a chance to be published by commercial publishers. So I hope this answers your question.

BERTONNEAU: Well, it does, I think. I might put one further



question to you, having something to do with this. Some people have criticized Charles Ives for precisely the same reasons you just criticized Erik Satie. They say that his scores, for example, rely too much on the verbiage, the marginalia, and I wonder if you would answer that criticism.

SLONIMSKY: Well, I believe that there is hardly any comparison between Charles Ives and Erik Satie, because Erik Satie simply didn't have the equipment for composition. He was over forty when he finally decided to take some lessons in counterpoint with Albert Roussel at the Schola Cantorum in Paris. And he never pretended to have the proper equipment, whereas Charles Ives was a tremendously educated composer. His first and second and third symphonies are written in a style that is very close to [Antonin] Dvořák, particularly the Second Symphony, and yet they are works of great individuality. So he started out from his full knowledge of how to compose music. As to his various marginal remarks, they are of no importance whatsoever. But the music of Ives can stand by itself. You can play the Concord Sonata and not read any of his remarks; in fact it's the introduction that has any of his whimsical points; otherwise it's music, and it's great music. Now, no matter how you judge Erik Satie's music, it isn't great music; it has innovations that are of an astonishing, I would say prophetic, nature, and his music works; actually it produces





an impression, even if you don't know anything about Charles Ives.

BERTONNEAU: Let me give you a chance to demonstrate something that you had to learn to do in order to conduct a piece by Charles Ives, the second movement of The Three Places in New England, which has all sorts of polymetric complexities in it.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. Well, this was a very interesting experiment; as a matter of fact, I didn't have to do that. See, it so happened that I conducted concerts of American music in, well, 1931.

BERTONNEAU: This is the one that we talked about earlier.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, forty-six years ago. And there I found that one particular piece by Wallingford Riegger was written so that some parts were in 5/8, and other parts were in 2/8. And it was too late to make adjustments in the parts. So I decided to try to conduct 5/8 with my right hand and 2/8 with my left hand. The eighths were always equal. But of course the downbeats and the upbeats obviously did not coincide. So I tried it and it worked. This is the way it went: one, two, three, four, five; one, two, three, four, five. . . . [demonstrates] So this is together, downbeat . . . this is the second measure . . . together again . . . so coinciding every tenth beat. Now I'll try to conduct it very slowly. [demonstrates] Even slower. It's



actually more difficult to conduct slower than faster. But anyway, you can see that you can follow my left hand beating 2/8 time and my right hand beating 5/8 time, and there would be no confusion. In fact, I can talk while doing it. [laughter]

Now, in the case of Ives, the problem was more difficult. There were two marching tunes going on at the same time. They were really similar but not quite identical. And they were so arranged that one section which represented a marching band in a New England village followed a faster time, so that four bars of one marching tune equaled three bars of the other. I'd better stand up to exhibit this. So I decided to conduct four bars against three bars, four bars in the left hand, alla breve--one, two, three, four--and three bars in the right hand, in 4/4. So . . . [demonstrates] together . . . and now very slow motion. See, the fourth beat in the right hand coincides with the down-beat in the left hand. Now, the third beat in the right hand coincides with the left hand, and now the second. See, I deliberately cut it on those measures, but. . . . [demonstrates] One, two, three, four; one, two, three, four; and so forth. So it actually worked in performance. And somebody said that my conducting was evangelical because my right hand knew not what my left hand was doing. At first the orchestra, they were bewildered. But since it worked, there



was no difficulty. And then I conducted this piece numerous times, the last time in Houston on the occasion of the centennial of Ives in 1974, and I conducted a school orchestra--I mean a college orchestra--they had no difficulty whatsoever, because nowadays there's a different attitude towards it.

BERTONNEAU: Did other conductors copy your technique? Could they do that?

SLONIMSKY: I don't know of a single conductor who ever tried to do this trick. I know that they always used either two conductors or made some other expedient, but as far as I know, I'm unique in this distinction, if it is a distinction. But since then I realized that I could do all kinds of things--for instance, that I can play two different scales in the left hand and in the right hand, in two different tempi.

BERTONNEAU: In two different tempi!

SLONIMSKY: I found that it was an excellent discipline--let's say, playing four to a beat in C major in the right hand and three to a beat in the left hand, or five in the right hand against four in the left hand. Let's say C major against E-flat major, or any other key. I select C major because then it's very clear for demonstration purposes. I will do it at the end of my conversation.

BERTONNEAU: In one of the earlier conversations we had



you talked about the Möbius Strip Tease, and I wondered if you wouldn't show that to us now and even sing the canon. . . .

SLONIMSKY: Yes, well. . . . [laughter] I can't sing the canon, because unfortunately I have only one voice, and the one technique that I never learned is to sing a duet all by myself. Although I understand that there is a singer, really a circus performer, who can sing with his nose and actually produce two different tones. I don't believe that it can be very artistic, but anyway it's most interesting. I never heard it; I never heard anybody do anything like that.

BERTONNEAU: Can I get the score for you?

SLONIMSKY: Yes, please do.

BERTONNEAU: This is actually on a large Möbius strip.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, well, of course, everybody by now knows what a Möbius strip is, and there was actually a man named Möbius, Professor [August] Möbius, who was the founder of topology. Now I understand that mathematically it's very important, because it has a way of returning to its source. So by composing this piece, I believe I produced the first truly perpetual canon, because most perpetual canons have to go back and turn the page back, but here I don't have to turn the page back. Now, the ideal arrangement would be to have some kind of a lampshade around my neck. It can be





done and then rotated, and while I sing the inside of it. . . . Well, anyway, the words are here: "Ah, Professor Möbius, glorious Möbius, we love your topological and ah, so logical strip, one-sided inside and two-sided outside, ah euphorious Möbius, what a wonderful strip tease!" Of course, I add at the end "strip tease." And if you go around your neck then it would be like this. [demonstrates] And at some points it becomes upside down, but it really isn't upside down, because there is no up, there is no down, and there is no left side, and there is no right side, and there is no inside and no outside. Quite a trick. You probably know Escher's Möbius strip representing ants crawling endlessly, you know, because obviously if you are on a Möbius strip, you can't find your way out. Well, anyway, I'm proud of being the only one, at least, in this. I actually had it published in a very far-out magazine called Source.

BERTONNEAU: Are you afraid that if you go back to the Soviet Union, you will be told by the Union of Soviet Composers that actually a Soviet musician was the first to do this?

SLONIMSKY: No. [laughter] I'm afraid they wouldn't be too proud to do that. As a matter of fact, I sent this to a top Soviet musicologist [Grigori Schneerson] with whom I am in correspondence, and he was completely bewildered. He said that he never knew that there was such a man Möbius.



He's a very educated man himself, that musicologist, and he had to look up the encyclopedia to find out about Möbius and the Möbius strip. He said he could not understand this from a purely musicological standpoint, and therefore he refrained from judging it. But he said his six-year-old grandson had a wonderful time operating it. I sent him a little replica of the Möbius strip, and he thought it was absolutely wonderful. So sort of ironically, this musicologist added in his letter, he said, "I suppose then that the future belongs to you and to my grandson." So I was naturally pleased with it.

As a matter of fact, apparently my status in Russia is quite favorable, because that same musicologist who edited a memorial volume for Shostakovitch asked me to compose a piece based on Shostakovitch's signature in the German lettering. This would be D, E-flat, C, B, which would spell in German DSCH (the initials of Shostakovitch's first name, Dmitri, and last name spelled in German). So this has been published in Moscow. I am really proud of that particular accomplishment because I'm the only one from the United States who was asked to contribute and whose piece was published there in the Shostakovitch memorial volume. And of course Shostakovitch was the greatest Soviet composer, so they wouldn't ask anybody to contribute unless he was absolutely safe ideologically and otherwise. [laughter]



Of course, I didn't have to be safe politically, but I had to be safe in the sense that I did not belong to the extreme wing of avant-garde music which they still do not recognize. But I might remark that I have a nephew in Russia who is a well-known Soviet composer, the same last name, Sergei Slonimsky, and his works are frequently performed. He's sort of half and half. He composes in the Russian style, but he uses modern devices, including tone clusters and a twelve-tone technique and so forth. But he doesn't go quite as far as I do in manufacturing Möbius strips.

BERTONNEAU: Do you think your trip to Russia with all your examples of American music might have influenced your nephew a little bit?

SLONIMSKY: Yes, I think so, because there is a tremendous interest in American music in Russia. And now there are really no ideological obstacles to composing very modern music. Of course, it's very ironic that the Soviet Union, which was supposed to be the most radical of all nations, has just become so stodgy in art and in music. But now they are gradually beginning to open up, and it is no longer a matter of suspicion if a Russian composer writes in a style that includes all kinds of modernistic devices.

BERTONNEAU: You have some Escher prints on the wall, and some mementos of Paris in one of the other rooms. I suppose that you like Escher. Who are some of your other favorite



visual artists, or plastic artists?

SLONIMSKY: I suppose that I can admit that I like painting or any kind of art inasmuch as I can see the technique behind it. Now possibly I'm an artistic technologist, that I believe in the technology of art. And that accounts also for Leonardo da Vinci, obviously, or Michelangelo. So I can admire some of Picasso. But I cannot accept so-called modern painting, which has no design behind it. I admire painters who can paint anything on given premises. For instance, of course you know that Picasso could draw a picture if you'd give him a few dots, random dots; he could immediately compose a picture out of it, just as a modern composer, or for that matter a romantic composer, could write a valid piece based on a random collection of notes. There is this example of Scarlatti's cat walking on the keyboard. Of course, it isn't verified. Somebody tried an experiment with a cat and had a cat walk on the keyboard several times, and the cat never produced the theme of Scarlatti's "Cat's Fugue." [laughter] I tried it with my own cat; it didn't work either. So I believe that music, painting, and poetry, for that matter, has to have the foundation of technical design. And I don't care then what it is. I don't even care if it is entirely capricious. But let us not go into that, because I can talk a lot about my tastes in literature and art and sculpture and so forth,





but this will be beside the point, which is after all music.

BERTONNEAU: Last time we talked about the Lectinary, and there's a very impressively large box sitting on the table next to you, and that is the manuscript of the Lectinary.

SLONIMSKY: That is the manuscript of my latest opus, which is called Lectinary of Musical Information, Instruction, and Entertainment. And if that doesn't sell big, then I give up. Although when I told my publisher that I'll give up, he said, "Nicolas, you'll never give up," and I suppose that's true. Well, anyway, it weighs about twenty-five pounds, and it contains so far about 1,800 pages. But it's not a complete manuscript. [laughter] So I'll have to send him something more. But anyway, it is Scribner's that is publishing it, and I have a contract, so I'm fairly assured that it will be published. I simply hope that it will be a commercial success because, after all, this still remains the superlative desideratum of a piece in my trade--to be a commercial success. When a manager of mine wanted to compliment me on one of my lecture recitals, he said, "Nicolas, you were wonderful! You were superb! Why, you were commercial!" Which, of course, is the highest degree of comparison.

BERTONNEAU: One of the things that we didn't talk very much about on the other tapes--in fact, I'm not sure if we talked about it at all, right now--was your teaching



career at UCLA, which ended in, well, a somewhat unusual way.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, well, I've done a lot of teaching. And in every instance I approach my teaching with high hopes. I believe that you can teach anybody anything, and I even invoke the example of Plato's dialogues, which show Socrates' claims that he could teach anybody because everything, of course, remains as an idea in the person himself. Well, I had some disappointments, because I found that most students are interested in just absorbing a minimum of what had to be absorbed. And sometimes, of course, I got extraordinary bits of information from my students which I still cherish, such as that Boris Godunov was a modern composer who wrote the opera Faust, or that arpeggio is faster than allegro, or that Schubert was born in Poland and died of TB in Paris and wrote the Unfinished Symphony, also known as Finlandia.

[laughter] People believe that I was inventing those things. But you can't invent those things. I mean, they are so wonderful, you just can't even enter into this psychology.

And yet I can say that I learned a lot from my students. Just as Schoenberg said in the introduction to his harmony book [Harmonielehre] that he learned this book from his students, meaning that he realized that when he used an ambiguous expression or an ambiguous indication, this resulted in an



error in a student's exercise, in which case it's the teacher who is to be blamed. I found, for instance, that it was a great difficulty to explain the difference between the key, as the key on the piano, and the key in the sense of tonality. So I began using both terms, I mean, key for the piano key, and the tonality for the sense of the key of C major and C minor and so forth. I learned a great deal.

In fact I published a book for children, supposedly, or for students, called The Road to Music. And that was a moderate best seller. I published it thirty years ago. It so happened that the Book-of-the-Month Club selected it as an alternate selection because--see, the main selection was Forever Amber, and there were so many people who didn't want Forever Amber that they were willing to take my book instead. As a result, it sold a number of copies, and I got a fat check. And the book is still going on. The opening sentence is, "All you have to do to understand this book is to know the alphabet from A to G" (obviously because this forms the scale) "and be able to count up to twelve" (because this is the number of semitones in an octave). And then I proceeded to try and prove it, but apparently not very successfully, because I had numerous letters from various teachers saying that they worked and worked on my book, and still they couldn't understand it



after trying very hard. Well, they couldn't understand it because they were limited to their own vocabulary. See, they couldn't get out of this vocabulary and begin to think in terms of semitones, for instance, instead of steps and half-steps and so forth.

And then, well, I don't know whether I should mention it, but my greatest victory, or at least a greatest source of personal satisfaction, came from the publication of my ostensibly most difficult book, The Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns, which proposes to codify all possible combinations of musical sounds in the tempered scale. I found a lot that was a surprise to myself, because I realized that by working with it, I was discovering things, like Escher's drawings, when you didn't know whether you were in a definite tonality or you were wandering around tonality. And then there were connections that were simply extraordinary, and all of a sudden mathematical relationships between certain harmonies and certain melodic progressions that were inherently very beautiful and were used by many composers, and yet they were based on the computation of tones and semitones. I will just give one example. It is possible, for instance, to connect the twelve-tone methods of composition--which is supposed to be the most atonal, the most unacceptable, the most unpleasing to the ear--with plain triads. It is possible to divide the scale of twelve tones into four different mutually





exclusive triads. So it is possible to write dodecaphonic music--that is, twelve-tone music--using only triads, which, needless to say, I immediately proceeded to do, to demonstrate.

BERTONNEAU: Would you like to play the piano a little bit for us?

SLONIMSKY: Yes, very much, because there are all kinds of things that can be demonstrated on the piano. Now, since I mentioned those scales, I can demonstrate them now audibly.  
[tape recorder turned off]

BERTONNEAU: There's a late friend of yours on top of the piano. Who is that? [points to a poster-sized reproduction of a human skull]

SLONIMSKY: That's one J.S. Bach, Johann Sebastian Bach. Well, the next question is obviously, how did you dig him up? [laughter] Well, I didn't dig him up. But a professor of anatomy at the University of Leipzig did dig up Bach in 1895, because the coffin was disintegrating and something had to be done to . . . save face. [laughter] Well, I don't mean "save face," but anyway, you know what I mean. So his remains were gathered, needless to say, with religious veneration, and this professor of anatomy made a series of wonderful pictures and published them in a book which is now a collector's item. I've been trying to get that book for years and I can't anyplace. But of course the book is



available in the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library and the Boston Public Library. I think there are three copies in the United States. Well, anyway, I asked the photography department at the Library of Congress to have a reproduction made, and I got the negative, and I had it blown up. The result is this absolutely inspiring picture of Bach, which needless to say I'm going to use as an illustration in my article on Bach in my forthcoming book Lectionary of Musical Information, Instruction, and Entertainment. Anyway, so the illustrations will be quite unusual.

BERTONNEAU: To entertain us, you're going to play your own derangements of Bach.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. Now here is a multiplication of Bach ["Bach X 2 = Debussy"]. Now I take this fugue, which is normal, [plays] and then I multiply all intervals by two. The result is that all semitones become whole tones, the whole piece becomes a whole-tone piece, and it sounds like Debussy, particularly when played slowly. [plays] Now there is another way of deranging and decomposing Bach, and it is by playing Bach tonally but in different keys, like this ["Bach in Fluid Tonality"]. [plays] It's kind of sickening, but at least it gives you a new idea of Bach. As a matter of fact, I put it on record, and one reviewer said, "You haven't lived if you haven't



heard Slonimsky play his arrangements of Bach." So apparently it produces an impression.

Now, of course, you can do the same thing with any kind of tune by simply distorting the melodic outline. It is really not too easy to explain, but it is rather easy to perform, and you just have to have this perverse type of psychology, and particularly musical psychology, in order to succeed. And I find that students who can't play the C major scale take to it very easily. [laughter]

Well, anyway, here goes "Happy Birthday to You." [plays] Now this is very atonal, of course, but you can recognize that this is "Happy Birthday." [plays] And it's written so that there are all twelve different notes of the scale employed. See. [plays]

BERTONNEAU: Would Schoenberg approve?

SLONIMSKY: Yes, well, I don't know whether Schoenberg would approve.

And here is "Ach, du lieber Augustin!" also in the twelve-tone technique--that is, twelve different notes in every section of the melody. [plays] And it's guaranteed dodecaphonic. Not that anybody cares, but it's twelve different notes.

And then finally, the ultimate blasphemy, the ultimate offense to music, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which is entitled " $\sqrt{B^5}$ ." Looks like a mathematical formula of



course, "B<sup>5</sup>" is Beethoven's Fifth, and all the intervals are compressed. So instead of this [plays] you have this. [plays] Now this is the way it goes, and figuratively speaking, take a tranquilizer. [plays] Now, I don't know whether Beethoven is or is not rotating in his grave, but that's how it is.

And then finally, you see, I take Schoenberg himself [plays]--this is a real Schoenberg piece--and I recycle it by making it sound exactly like Tristan. In fact I have a notion that this--this is a genuine Schoenberg piece, opus 32. [plays] This is still genuine Schoenberg. . . . Now, I take the same melody but I harmonize it in Tristan harmonies ["Kryptokrebschönwagnerbergblatt"]. Again the rhythm and the direction of the melody is maintained, and in fact the melody is the same as in Schoenberg. Now I'll play the same thing backwards. [continues playing] And it ends in a coda which I call "Tristantissimo." [stops playing] Well, anyway, it's a trick, but I think it's a valid trick.

Now, why don't I play for you an example of the kind of music that anyone can compose provided he or she can spell common words using only the first seven letters of the alphabet. And you get "Cabbage Waltz" by spelling cabbage on the piano. When I gave a talk on music for a kindergarten class, I asked whether anybody could spell





cabbage, and, sure enough, a little boy stood up and said, "I can spell cabbage. C-A-B-I-D-G-E." And he killed my trick because, of course, there is no i. So here it is, C-A-B-B-A-G-E. [plays the entire waltz, calling out the notes]. So this is one way of composing music that guarantees that you don't have to know anything except the alphabet.

BERTONNEAU: You play the piano backwards. You say that you never met anybody else that can do that. So why don't you do it.

SLONIMSKY: Well, that I can do. [stands up, back to keyboard] I have to find my, well, here is, straight, "Ach, du lieber Augustin." [plays] Well, anyway. [turns and sits]

BERTONNEAU: And something else you promised us: you play Tannhäuser--is it?--the overture from Tannhäuser with a brush.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, the overture from Tannhäuser with a brush.

BERTONNEAU: And an orange!

SLONIMSKY: An orange, this is for Chopin's "Black Key" Etude, which goes much easier for the right hand using an orange instead of actual fingers. [plays Chopin with orange in right hand, to uproarious laughter] Now, there is a pesky passage of figurations for the violins, very high in the register, in the Tannhäuser Overture, [starts



theme with left hand] and on the piano it comes out almost as well, or as badly [continues playing, brush in right hand] with a brush. [concludes, turns] So much for entertainment--if . . . this . . . is entertainment.

Now I decided to gather all my funny pieces, or at least pieces that I intended to be funny, and some pieces like the derangements of Bach into a collection which I call Minitudes. Each one is very short; obviously, this is at least one undoubted merit.

There's one piece that I'd like to play which has something to do with my childhood reminiscences. I called it "Déjà Entendu" (not déjà vu, but déjà entendu). I'm sure when I was a child that I heard it and played it, but for the life of me I cannot find out what that piece was. It was some kind of a German nineteenth-century piece. So I rearranged it and combined it with an Argentine tango and put it all together and made a musical bouillabaisse out of it. [plays] So at least it's short.

BERTONNEAU: Well, let me ask you at least one question that you can give a short answer, and then maybe we can play one more piece before the tape runs out. You published not too long ago an article in a music journal called "Sex and the Music Librarian." I want to know what "Sex and the Music Librarian" is about.

SLONIMSKY: I didn't publish it--I wouldn't have disgraced



myself to the extent of publishing it. But the genesis of this article was as follows. I was asked to read a paper for a meeting of American music librarians in Chapel Hill in North Carolina. I couldn't go. The chairman of the conference [William Lichtenwanger] was a friend of mine who is the head of the reference division of the music department of the Library of Congress; he's a very humorous guy. So I said I didn't even know what type of subject they would like delivered. He said, "Why don't you write about sex among music librarians?" So one idle afternoon I sat down, and I typed out a four-page article about sex and the music librarian. Of course, music librarians are notoriously asexual guys, or gals for that matter. I mean, you can just spot a music librarian at once and figure out all their hang-ups without calling in a psychoanalyst. [laughter] So I gave an exposition on sex and the music librarian, with some definite references. I didn't name any names, but it became obvious to anyone who is conversant with this very small minority among musicians. Mostly music librarians are those who can't play an instrument and can't have much sex, so they get into this business of looking into the archives and finding some satisfaction among those things. So I sent it to him, and he read it by proxy. And apparently it was the greatest success of the convention--which is no wonder, because if you listen to some of those papers



delivered at those musicological meetings, you know it's enough to kill a horse, or enough to cure insomnia in two minutes. [laughter] So it was a success, so much so that I was embarrassed by being met with smiles every time I would enter, even at a new music library. Well, of course, the New York Public Library--I would come into the music division, and people would smile and say, "Oh, we enjoyed your paper on sex and the music librarian so much." I was horrified. Of course, I didn't even have a copy, and I simply had no idea what I might have said in that thing. But I decided not to sue my good friend for it. And he played the tape for me, and there were seventeen laughs. So I was satisfied.

Anyway, I decided actually to credit myself with it and, very solemnly, in the supplement to Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians, published in 1971, I said, "He also delivered an erudite paper, by proxy, 'Sex and the Music Librarians,'" date and everything.

BERTONNEAU: It's there for history now.

SLONIMSKY: Yes. And then if you look up the latest edition of Die Musik Geschichte und Gegenwart, which is one of those sprawling German music encyclopedias, so what do you find there? There I'm credited with this learned paper, "Sex and the Music Librarian." Now, of course, I can't even stop it. It will be copied from one source to





another. I think Riemann's Musik Lexikon has already inserted it. Because, after all, you know, you can't tell it. Here is something that was actually delivered and something that I used in my own book for fun, you see, but it ceases to be fun when it travels into the editorial offices of music, of German music encyclopedias. It becomes very serious. So I can't even kill it off.

BERTONNEAU: How about a grand musical finale dedicated to all the students who ever practiced Czerny. I see a piece on your piano called "Czerny, Shmerny" and I would love to hear that.

SLONIMSKY: Yes, well this is the sort of thing that, you know--well, you may call it satire. You mentioned Satie; well, Satie might have composed something like that, except he wouldn't have said "Czerny, Shmerny" because this is all right in America, possibly in England, but of course in French it doesn't mean anything. [plays; concludes; applause of camera crew]

BERTONNEAU: Well, thank you very, very much for your time and for entertaining us on the piano.



# INDEX

## A

"Ach du lieber Augustin" (song)	316
Adams, Horst	274-275
<u>Aeolus</u> (periodical)	118
Akhmatova, Anna	199
Albéniz, Isaac	143
Alexander I (emperor of Russia)	6
Almeida, Laurindo	144
<u>American Composers of the Twentieth Century--Twelve Compositions in Their Original Form for Piano</u>	146
<u>American Composers on American Music</u> (Cowell)	78, 324
American Opera Company	52-53, 56
Amtorg Trading Corporation	210
Antheil, George	85
<u>Approaches to Writing</u> (Horgan)	57
Apthorp, William Foster	176
Ariola, Pepito	22-23
Armando, Gualtério	273-278
Atheneum, Boston	81
<u>Atlantic Monthly</u> (periodical)	5
<u>Awakening of a Conscience</u> (print)	317

## B

Bach, Johann Sebastian	170, 185, 298, 319, 338-340, 343
Baker, Theodore	263-266, 268, 269
<u>Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians</u>	242, 262-279, 293, 345
Ballet Russe	44
<u>Baltimore Sun</u> (newspaper)	284
Barber, Samuel	13
<u>Adagio for Strings</u>	227
Beatles, The	257
Becker, John	106
Beethoven, Ludwig van	16, 62, 89, 107, 108-110, 141, 254-255, 267, 312, 316
<u>Egmont Overture</u>	90
<u>Konversationshefte</u>	108, 252
<u>Symphony no. 3</u>	251-254
<u>Symphony no. 5</u>	253, 340-341
<u>Symphony no. 9</u>	316



Belaiev, Mitrofan	17-18
Bellini, Vincenzo	313
Benchley, Robert	298
Berg, Alban	158
<u>Berliner Tageblatt</u> (newspaper)	124
Berlin Philharmonic	122, 125
Berlioz, Hector	269
Bernstein, Beverly	285, 293
Bernstein, Leonard	13, 111, 119, 267
Bezekirsky, Vassili	280-281
"The Big Surprise" (TV program)	282-295, 296
Birchard, C.C.	98, 112
Bizet, Georges	
<u>Carmen</u>	290, 309
Bloch, Ernest	170
Blomdahl, Karl-Birger	
<u>Aniara</u>	158
Bloom, Eric	279
Bolivia	189
Bonaparte, Napoleon	251-254
Book-of-the-Month Club	336
Borodin, Aleksandr Porfirevich	7, 315
Boston, Massachusetts	164, 177
<u>Boston Evening Transcript</u> (newspaper)	81, 82, 87, 165
<u>Boston Globe</u> (newspaper)	68, 69, 70
<u>Boston Herald</u> (newspaper)	120, 295
Boston Pops Orchestra	146
<u>Boston Post</u> (newspaper)	93
Boston Public Library	165, 176, 339
Boston Symphony Orchestra	51, 66, 68, 79-80, 83, 84, 85, 86, 88, 90, 97, 107, 165, 176
Boston University	206-207
Brahms, Johannes	176
Brazil	189
British Museum, London	164
Britten, Benjamin	170
Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI)	214
Broder, Nat	272
Brown, Allen	176
Budapest, Hungary	127-128
Bulgaria	240-241
Burgin, Richard	107
Busoni, Ferruccio	154
C	
Cage, John	227
Calvocoressi, Michel D.	174
Carter, Jimmy	226



Carturla, Alejandro	
<u>Bembé</u>	117
Casella, Alfredo	166
<u>Casket, The</u> (periodical)	298
Castoria laxative	73, 74, 75
<u>Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia</u>	311
<u>Chabrier, Emmanuel</u>	144
Chamber Orchestra of Boston	83, 86, 92, 96-97
"Charmante Cathérine" (song)	314-315
Chávez, Carlos	182
<u>Energía</u>	117
Chekhov, Anton	222, 225
<u>Chicago Sun-Times</u> (newspaper)	179
<u>Chicago Symphony Orchestra</u>	142
Chopin, Frédéric	20, 22, 177
"Black Key" Etude	342
"Chopsticks"	315
<u>Christian Science Monitor</u> (newspaper)	165, 207, 208, 209
<u>Cluj, Rumania</u>	240
Coates, Albert	56, 66, 85
Coleman, Herbert	159-160
Coleman-Ross Company	159
Coltrane, John	161
Columbia Records	188
<u>Comoedia</u> (periodical)	116
<u>Concord, Massachusetts</u>	81
Cooke, James Francis	22-23
Copland, Aaron	84, 85, 112, 200, 206, 215
Piano Concerto	84
Council of American-Soviet Friendship	203, 217
Cowell, Henry	76, 78, 83, 85, 86, 93, 97, 105, 106, 108, 112, 117, 128, 136, 138, 139, 148, 227
<u>Suite for piano and orchestra</u>	92
"Leprechaun"	92
<u>Symphonietta</u>	87, 93
<u>Synchrony</u>	122
Cracow, Poland	237, 238
Creston, Paul	138
Curtis Institute of Music	13
Czerny, Carl	109, 346
D	
Dahms, Walter	273-278, 279
Dallapiccola, Luigi	166
Dankevitch, Konstantin	213





"Dark Eyes" (song)	316
<u>Day of the Jackal, The</u> (film)	245
Debussy, Claude	144, 155, 164, 176, 177, 179, 339
Defauw, Désiré	142
Deis, Carl	158-159
Diaghilev, Sergei	44
Diamond, David	227
Dickens, Charles	73
<u>Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart</u>	277, 345
"Dixie" (song)	300
Donizetti, Gaetano	313
Dostoyevsky, Fëdor Mikhailovich	3, 4, 6, 195
Dvořák, Antonin	325
<u>Dwight's Journal of Music</u>	176
E	
Eastman, George	52-53
Eastman School of Music	40, 55, 59, 62, 66, 67, 72, 79, 80, 98, 218
Eastman Theatre	55
Einstein, Alfred	124
<u>Encyclopaedia Britannica</u>	23, 285-286, 288, 301
Engel, Carl	262
Escher, M.C.	301, 330, 332, 337
<u>Etude</u> (periodical)	22
F	
<u>Fail-Safe</u> (Burdick)	220
Falla, Manuel de	143
<u>Fanfare</u> (periodical)	133
Federal Bureau of Investigation	201-205, 210, 221
Fernandez, Oscar Lorenzo	183
Fiedler, Arthur	186-187
<u>Finnegans Wake</u> (Joyce)	303
Fisher, Geoffrey Francis	207-208
Fleisher, Edwin A.	182-183
Fleisher, Edwin A., collection	182, 183
Foote, Arthur	120
Ford, Henry	82
<u>Forever Amber</u> (Winsor)	336
Fromm, Paul	179
Furtwängler, Wilhelm	62, 104
G	
Gable, Mrs. Clark	286, 287



Gary, Indiana, orchestra	142
Gavazzeni, Gianandrea	166
Gebhard, Heinrich	
<u>Divertimento</u> for piano and orchestra	86, 87
Gerhart, Mr. _____	79
<u>Germania</u> (newspaper)	124
Gershwin, George	162, 173, 226
<u>Rhapsody in Blue</u>	83
Giannini, Vittorio	79
Gilbert, Henry	92-93
Ginastera, Alberto	189
Glazunov, Alexander	18-19, 24, 27, 32, 194-195
Gleason, Ralph	256
Gluck, Christoph Willibald	175
Goossens, Eugene	56, 66-67, 93, 103-105, 149
Gorky, Maxim	4, 194-195
Gounod, Charles Francois	
<u>Faust</u>	309, 335
GPU (USSR)	211
Graffman, Gary	13
Granados, Enrique	143
<u>Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians</u>	242, 246, 263, 264-265, 266-267, 278-279

## H

Hale, Philip	120-121, 176, 177
Handley, A.H.	86, 95
Hanslick, Eduard	178
Hanson, Howard	98, 217, 218, 229
"Happy Birthday to You" (song)	316
Harris, Roy	214, 227
Harvard University Orchestra	88-91
Hauer, Josef	168, 169
Havana, Cuba	134
Hayes, Roland	75, 80, 147, 148
Hearst, William Randolph	130
Heifetz, Jascha	25, 144
Heinsheimer, Hans	263, 273
Hemingway, Ernest	63
Hertz, Alfred	132
Hindemith, Paul	
<u>Neues vom Tage</u>	150
Hitler, Adolf	121, 198
<u>H.M.S. Pinafore</u> (Gilbert and Sullivan)	287



Hollywood, California	201, 209
Hollywood Bowl	129, 131-133, 135
Honegger, Arthur	116
Hoover, Herbert	29, 43
Horgan, Paul	56-59, 60-61, 78-79
<u>The Fault of Angels</u>	59
<u>"Neath Stars"</u>	74
I	
<u>International Cyclopedia of Music</u> <u>and Musicians</u>	196, 242, 258-261, 271, 273
Istanbul, Turkey	29, 38-39
<u>International Who's Who in Music</u> <u>and Musical Gazeteer</u>	268
Ives, Charles	83, 84, 93, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 122, 123, 125-126, 127, 128, 129, 131, 134, 135, 136, 139- 140, 141, 143, 147, 177, 184, 227, 325-326 121
<u>A Symphony: Holidays</u> <u>"Washington's Birthday"</u>	137, 138, 139
<u>Concord Sonata</u>	98, 325
<u>114 Songs</u>	98
<u>Three Places in New England</u>	94, 96, 97, 98-104, 107, 112, 114, 129, 326-327
Symphony no. 1	325
Symphony no. 2	111, 325
Symphony no. 3	325
Symphony no. 4	93, 104
Ives, Mrs. Charles	107, 111, 112, 113, 140
J	
Jahn, Otto	248, 251
<u>Jazz</u> (periodical)	256
Jordan, Eben Dyer	92
Jordan Hall, Boston	92
<u>Journal of the American Musicological</u> <u>Society</u> (periodical)	209-210
K	
Kabalevsky, Dmitri Borisovitch	167-168, 197, 213, 216
Kastner, Santiago	275-276



Kay, Ulysses	214
Kennedy, John F.	223, 225
Kenton, Stan	161
Kerensky, Alexander	30-31
Khatchaturian, Aram	
<u>Gayane</u>	228
<u>Spartacus</u>	228
Khrennikov, Tikhon	167, 213
Khrushchev, Nikita	211, 212, 213, 214, 223, 225, 232
Kiesgan and Délaet, Paris	113-114
Kiev, USSR	34, 36, 37, 38
Kissinger, Henry	179-180
Kleiber, Erich	62
Klemperer, Otto	104, 118, 119, 125- 126, 140
Kondorossy, Leslie	270
Koussevitzky, Serge	40, 46-51, 59, 62- 72, 80, 84, 85, 87, 97, 100, 104, 110, 113, 164, 165
Koussevitzky (Smith)	69
Kramer, Walter	180
Kunkel, Karl	
<u>Alpine Storm</u>	322
Kunkel, Ludwig Beethoven	322
L	
Leipzig, Germany	17, 18
<u>Le Menestrel</u> (periodical)	175
Lenin, Nikolai	6, 30, 36-37
Leningrad, USSR	1-2, 4, 5, 6, 26, 30-33
<u>Le Temps</u> (newspaper)	118
Library of Congress	146, 167, 217, 297, 339, 344
Lichtenwanger, William	344
<u>Link, The</u> (periodical)	60
Liszt, Franz	64, 107, 108-109, 157, 177, 179, 315
Loeffler, Charles Martin	120
Loesser, Arthur	218
Los Angeles Philharmonic	123, 127, 129, 131, 140, 142
<u>Los Angeles Times</u> (newspaper)	133
Lunacharski, Anatoli	195
Lutoslawski, Witold	236





# M

McCarthy, Joseph	200-201, 204-205, 211, 212
MacDowell, Edward	229
MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc.	258, 266
Mahler, Gustav	314
Mamouljian, Rouben	56, 57, 79
Mannes, David	217-218
Marx, Karl	5-6, 248
Mascagni, Pietro	265-266
"Maxixe" (song)	316
Mengelberg, Wilhelm	104
Menotti, Gian-Carlo	267
<u>Messenger of Europe, The</u> (periodical)	5
<u>Meyerbeer, Giacomo</u>	323
<u>Meyerhold, Vsevolod</u>	193
Miaskovsky, Nikolai Yakovlevitch	167, 198
Milhaud, Darius	76
Möbius, August	301, 302, 329, 330, 331
Mochulsky, Konstantin	60
Monteux, Pierre	48
Morgan, J.P.	12
Moscow Art Theatre	222
Moscow, USSR	4, 6
Mozart, Constanze Weber	247
Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus	16, 89, 131, 175, 246-251
Mozzhukhin, Alexander	46
"Mr. Slonimsky in Paris" (article)	120
<u>Musical America</u> (periodical)	175, 259
<u>Musical Courier</u> (periodical)	175
<u>Musical Quarterly</u> (periodical)	262
<u>Musical Times</u> (periodical)	174
<u>Music at Harvard</u> (Spalding)	91
Mussorgsky, Modest	18, 46
<u>Pictures at an Exhibition</u>	131
<u>Songs of the Dead</u>	52
Muybridge, Eadweard	288

# N

National Broadcasting Company	214, 216, 286
<u>National Enquirer</u> (periodical)	249
"New Discoveries by Nicolas Slonimsky in His Edition of <u>Baker's</u> <u>Dictionary</u> " (WQXR broadcast)	270
New England Conservatory of Music	92



<u>New Masses, The</u> (periodical)	207, 208-209, 217
<u>New Music Quarterly</u> (periodical)	76, 324
New Orleans, Louisiana	171-172, 255, 256
New York City, New York	112, 114
<u>New Yorker, The</u> (periodical)	179, 223, 266, 298
New York Philharmonic	137
New York Public Library	339, 345
<u>New York Sun</u> (newspaper)	259
<u>New York Times</u> (newspaper)	215, 257
Nicholas I (emperor of Russia)	6
Nissen, Georg	246-247
Norton, W.W.	172
Norton, Mrs. W.W.	172

## O

<u>Oblomov</u> (Goncharov)	4
"Ochi Chornya" (song)	316
Orchestra Straram	113
Orion Masterworks Record Company	8, 138
O'Shaughnessy, John (Paul Horgan)	61
<u>Oxford Companion to Music</u>	265, 278

## P

Pan-American Association of Composers	125
Pan-American Ensemble	129
Paris, France	44-45, 114, 119, 120
Parker, H.T.	81, 87-88
Peabody Conservatory of Music	284
Penderecki, Krzysztof	237
Pennsylvania College for Women	205-206, 209
Pepsodent toothpaste	74, 75
Petrassi, Goffredo	166
Philadelphia Orchestra	187
Piatigorsky, Gregor	25
Picasso, Pablo	333
Pipkov, Lubomir	241
Piston, Walter	91, 112, 227
<u>Pittsburgh Gazette</u> (newspaper)	207
Poland	234-238
<u>Popular Fallacies</u> (book)	286
Poznań, Poland	237
<u>Practical Manual of Harmony</u> (Rimsky-Korsakov)	153
<u>Pravda</u> (newspaper)	192, 221
Presley, Elvis	161, 257
Price, Franklin	182
Progressive Bookshop	204



Prokofiev, Sergey Sergeyevitch	116, 133, 179, 198, 208, 209, 242, 244
<u>Classical Symphony</u>	180
<u>Peter and the Wolf</u>	167, 174
<u>Punch</u> (periodical)	223
"Purple Piano" (song)	161
Pushkin, Aleksandr Sergeyevich	230, 231
<u>Eugene Onegin</u>	309
R	
Rachmaninoff, Sergey Vassilievitch	46
Rameau, Jean-Philippe	153, 267
Ravel, Maurice	131, 155, 173, 177
RCA Corporation	136
Remy, Alfred	268
Revlon, Inc.	291-292
Ricordi and Company, G.	184
Riegger, Wallingford	136, 138, 206-207, 227, 326
<u>Three Canons</u>	102-103, 115
<u>Riemanns Musik Lexikon</u>	242, 259, 262, 263, 273, 274-276, 346
Ries, Ferdinand	253, 254
Rimsky-Korsakov, Nikolai Andreevich	17, 18, 152-154, 197, 313
<u>Boris Godunov</u>	335
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	186
Ripley's Believe It or Not (book)	286
<u>Rivista Musicale Italiana</u> (periodical)	166
Rochester, New York	53, 55, 59
Rodriguez, José	
"Old Mare Gets a Shot in the Arm"	131
(article)	
Rodzinski, Artur	131
Roldán, Amadeo	
<u>La Rebambaramba</u>	121, 122, 123
Rosing, Vladimir	52-53, 57
Rossini, Gioacchino	264-265, 266, 323
Roussel, Albert	325
Rubbra, Edmund	159
Ruggles, Carl	105, 106, 129, 134, 137, 138, 139, 227
<u>Men and Mountains</u>	97, 107-108, 114, 115
Rumania	240
Rybner, Cornelius	260



## S

Saerchinger, César	268
St. Mark's Cemetery, Vienna	248
St. Petersburg Conservatory of Music	16-17, 18, 19, 21, 25, 27, 153, 191- 192, 194
St. Stephen's Cathedral, Vienna	248
Salzedo, Carlos	138
San Francisco Call-Bulletin	171, 256
San Francisco Symphony Orchestra	129
Sanjuán, Pedro	
<u>Sones de Castilla</u>	115
Sargeant, Winthrop	179
Satie, Erik	323, 325-326, 346
<u>Saturday Evening Post</u> (periodical)	73
Savinsky, Nicolai (Nicolas Slonimsky)	58-59, 61
Scarlatti, Domenico	
"Cat's Fugue"	333
Schaum, John W.	146-147
Schenk, Erich	246
Schillinger, Joseph	161-162
Schindler, Anton	252, 253
Schirmer, G., Inc.	158, 161, 262, 263, 266, 267, 272, 273, 277-278, 292
Schirmer, Gustav, III	292-293
Schloezer, Boris	116
Schmitt, Florent	118
Schneerson, Grigorij	225, 330-331
Schoenberg, Arnold	77, 104-105, 110, 115, 134-135, 152, 168-170, 177, 179, 180, 340, 341
<u>Accompaniment to a Cinema Scene</u>	134
<u>Harmonielehre</u> (book)	335-336
<u>Pelleas und Melisande</u>	175
<u>Verklärte Nacht</u>	135
<u>Von Heute auf Morgen</u> , op. 32	341
Schola Cantorum, Paris	325
Scholes, Percy	278
Schubert, Franz	
<u>Unfinished Symphony</u>	89, 90, 313, 335
Schuman, William	138
Schumann, Robert	16, 20, 22, 74
<u>Scientific American</u> (periodical)	303
Scriabin, Alexander	17-18, 36, 37, 84, 116, 314
Scriabin, Julian	37-38





Scriabin, Tatiana Schloezer	37
Scriabin, Vera	37
Scribner's, Charles, Sons	334
Sessions, Roger	141-142
Shakespeare, William	73, 301
Shaporin, Yuri	197
Shepherd, Arthur	98
Shostakovitch, Dmitri	167, 170, 191, 192, 194-195, 197, 198, 208, 209, 213, 215, 216, 242, 244, 331
<u>Lady Macbeth of the District</u> <u>of Mtzensk</u>	192
<u>The Nose</u>	192
<u>Symphony no. 4</u>	232
<u>Symphony no. 7</u>	208, 217
Sibelius, Jean	131
Sinclair, Upton	130
"The \$64 Question" (radio program)	283
"The \$64,000 Question" (TV program)	283-284, 286-287
<u>Sketch of a New Aesthetic in Music</u> (Busoni)	154
<u>Slavonic and East European Review</u> (periodical)	191
Slonimsky, Alexander	7-8, 196, 199, 211, 224, 228, 231
Slonimsky, Antoni	234, 235-236
Slonimsky, Chaim Selig	7
Slonimsky, Electra	204, 284-285, 291, 296
Slonimsky, Faina	7, 8, 11, 13, 81
Slonimsky, Leonid	5, 10, 16
Slonimsky, Michael	7-8, 196, 199, 221, 231
Slonimsky, Sergei	212-213, 221-222, 224, 227, 228, 241, 332
First Symphony	229
Society of Unrecognized Geniuses	57, 59, 61
Sofia, Bulgaria	42-43
Sorabji, Kaikhosru	278-279
<u>Source</u> (periodical)	302, 303, 330
Spivacke, Harold	217
Spohr, Louis	265
Stalin, Joseph	8, 38, 198, 199, 203, 204, 205, 211, 212, 232, 233
Stanford, Leland	288



Steinberg, Maximilian	19, 197-198
Stern, Isaac	179
Stokowski, Leopold	104, 105
Straram, Walther	113
Strauss, Richard	177, 322
<u>Alpine</u> Symphony	66
Stravinsky, Igor	84, 133, 179, 242
<u>Le Sacre du Printemps</u>	47-51, 64, 100, 119
<u>Petrouchka</u>	156, 315
<u>Ragtime</u>	110
Strobel, Heinrich	124, 180-181
Sviridov, Georgy	230-231

## T

<u>Tabellen sur Musikgeschichte</u> (Schering)	164
Tabu perfume	317, 318
Taubman, Howard	215
Taylor, Deems	120
Tchaikovsky, Piotr Ilyitch	157, 312-313, 318-320
<u>Eugene Onegin</u>	319
First Piano Concerto	177
<u>Pathétique</u> Symphony	176, 319
<u>The Queen of Spades</u>	319, 320
<u>Seasons</u>	319
"Ten Little Fingers" (Williams)	267
Thompson, Oscar	258-260
<u>Three Historic Premieres</u> (recording)	138
<u>Time</u> (periodical)	295
Tolstoy, Lev Nikolaevich	3
Toscanini, Arturo	62, 103, 104
<u>Transatlantic</u> (musical)	257
Trotsky, Leon	37
<u>TV Guide</u> (periodical)	292, 293

## U

Ukraine, USSR	33-34, 35
Union of Soviet Composers	229
United Fruit Company	69, 70
United Nations	215
U.S. Department of State	
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Relations	213-214, 216, 217, 218, 219, 221, 224, 229, 238
U.S. House of Representatives	
Committee on Un-American Activities	206



U.S. Information Agency	219
University of California, Los Angeles	150, 335
University of Chicago	293
University of Leipzig	298, 338
University of St. Petersburg	304
University of Vienna	246
Utica sheets and pillow cases	74
V	
Varèse, Edgar	83, 115, 116, 128, 131, 136, 143, 148, 227-228 123-124
<u>Arcana</u>	114, 115
<u>Intégrales</u>	132, 134, 135, 137-139
<u>Ionisation</u>	171, 256
<u>Variety</u> (periodical)	211-212
Vengerov, Annette	211-212
Vengerov, Vselovod	13, 15, 16-17, 19-21
Vengerova, Isabelle	64
Verdi, Giuseppe	
Victor Company, The <u>see</u> RCA Corporation	
Vienna, Austria	16
Vienna Montagblatt (newspaper)	249
Villa-Lobos, Heitor	182, 183-186, 242
<u>Bachianas Brasileiras</u>	184-186
Vladigerov, Pantcho	240, 241
Vogel, Mrs. _____	274
W	
Wagner, Richard	64, 177, 179, 319
<u>Tannhäuser</u>	175, 342-343
<u>Tristan und Isolde</u>	341
Wallace, Michael	289, 290
Walter, Bruno	104
Washington, D.C.	179
Webern, Anton von	169
Weir, Albert	258
Weiss, Adolph	114-115
<u>American Life</u>	115
Whiteman, Paul	171
"Who's Afraid of Nicolas Slonimsky?" (article)	179
Wiedemann, Otto	141
Wilde, Oscar	58, 72, 73, 147, 197



Wooldridge, David	125-126
<u>From the Steeples to the</u>	119
<u>Mountains: A Study of</u>	
<u>Charles Ives</u>	

## Y

"Yankee Doodle" (song)	300
Yradier, Sebastian	290
Yugoslavia	239-240

## Z

Zoshchenko, _____ (humorist)	199
Zyžík, Krst	271-273





## INDEX OF NICOLAS SLONIMSKY WORKS

### Publications

"Coexistence of Modern Music and Socialist Realism" (lecture)	224
<u>Lectionary of Musical Information, Instruction, and Entertainment</u>	298, 310-318, 334, 339
<u>Lexicon of Musical Invective</u>	174, 179-181
"On the Non-acceptance of the Unfamiliar" (preface essay)	177
<u>Music of Latin America</u>	189-190
<u>Music Since 1900</u>	128, 163, 164-174, 178, 181, 183, 242, 256, 312
<u>The Road to Music</u>	336-337
"Sex and the Music Librarian" (article)	343-346
<u>Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns</u>	72, 151-162, 282, 300, 337

### Compositions

<u>Fifty Minutes</u>	16, 150-151, 162, 303, 343
"Ach du lieber Augustin"	340
" $\sqrt{B^5}$ "	340
"Bach in Fluid Tonality"	339
"Bach x 2 = Debussy"	339
"Cabbage Waltz"	341-342
"Czerny, Shmerny"	346



"Déjà Entendu"	16, 343
"Happy Birthday to You"	340
"Kryptokrebschönwagnerbergblatt"	341
"Modinha Russo Brasileira"	187-188
"Quaquaversal Quarks"	303
<u>Five Advertising Songs</u>	72-75
"And Then Her Doctor Told Her"	74
"Children Cry for Castoria"	73, 74, 75
"No More Shiny Nose"	74
"Make This a Day of Pepsodent"	74, 75
"Utica Sheets and Pillow Cases"	74
<u>Four Picturesque Pieces for Ambitious Pianists</u>	145-146
"Dreams and Drums"	146
"Kiddies on the Keys"	146
"The Opening of the Piano"	146
<u>Garden Songs</u>	148
<u>Gravestones of Hancock, New Hampshire</u>	297
"Lydia"	300
"Stop, My Friends, As You Pass By"	299-300
"The Haunting Horn" (waltz)	82, 145
<u>Impressions (songs)</u>	147, 197
"Silhouettes"	72, 147
"Flight of the Moon"	147
"I Owe a Debt to a Monkey" (song)	148-149
<u>Little Suite</u> for chamber group with percussion and a typewriter	149-150



<u>Möbius Strip Tease</u> for soprano and tenor	301-303, 329
"My Little Pool" (song)	147
<u>My Toy Balloon, Variations on a Brazilian Tune</u>	186-187
<u>Overture on an Ancient Greek Theme, in the Enharmonic Mode</u>	133-134
<u>Prince Goes A-Hunting</u> (ballet, story by Paul Horgan)	79
<u>Silhouettes Ibériennes</u> for piano	143-144
<u>Studies in Black and White</u>	76-78, 85, 149-150, 151, 324
"Typographical Errors"	149-150
<u>Yellowstone Park Suite</u> for piano	
"Old Faithful"	77















